Case Narrative: Kevin, age 18

Kevin Bentley, a Caucasian 18-year-old, has a serious problem that he’s been keeping to himself for what he believes are good reasons. His mother relies on him to be the ‘good kid’, the one who quietly goes about his business. She’s preoccupied with his older brother Terrance, 24. Terr was the one with promise; an actor and athlete in high school. Kevin’s mother was certain that he was going to make it big. But in his junior year, Terr lost interest in school, dropped out, and began hanging out with older friends from the city. Kevin recalls the night when Terr came home so wild and out of his head that the police were called. Nothing was ever the same after that night. Peg, Kevin’s mother, hardly smiled. She spent her time obsessively cleaning, planning, and micro-managing the household, including everyone in it. His dad, Frank, was out most nights playing racket ball or hanging with his work buddies at the local brewery. When together his parents were either silent or fought. No one knew exactly where Terr lived. He’d call from time and time, make promises, and then break them. Kevin was afraid to admit that he hated his brother.

Things got even worse when in Kevin’s junior year his father was diagnosed with stage four pancreatic cancer. This shocked everyone who knew Frank as a robust triathlete, reliable shipyard worker, helpful neighbor, and DIY guy who could fix anything. Kevin’s mother went on family leave from her nursing job and money was tight. She dedicated herself to finding a cure despite the oncologist’s kind but emphatic, terminal diagnosis. She scoured the internet and insisted that Frank try a myriad of alternative treatments. But nothing worked and as Kevin applied to colleges, he watched his father slowly transform from his ‘dad’ to a man whose life was slipping away.

Kevin had planned to take a year off before going to college. He wasn’t ready to leave home, especially given his dad’s illness. He wanted to work full time at the shipyard where he hoped to return after getting his degree. But his mother was firm that he couldn’t lose time; she needs him to be successful. Kevin applied to the colleges his mother selected not really caring where he got in. He decides to attend the state university where he can play baseball, keep working part-time, and where several of his friends are going.

As graduation approaches, Kevin becomes increasingly anxious. One of his friends offers him an oxycontin that he’s pilfered from his grandmother’s medicine cabinet. Oxy takes the edge off and Kevin notices that he’s able to enjoy himself for the first time in a while. Kevin knows that his father has an ample supply of Oxy and other drugs for pain management but just the thought of stealing his father’s medication makes him cringe.

A week later though Kevin finds himself highly anxious before an important final exam. “No one will know the difference” he rationalizes as he slips the pills in his pocket. Since that time Kevin has been diverting his father’s pain medications on a regular basis. No one suspects that he’s the one taking the drugs. Even when the hospice nurse asks Peg if she’s noticed that some of Frank’s pain meds are short, his mother defends him. “I could imagine my other son taking them. But not Kevin. He’s never been into drugs or alcohol.”

Kevin knows he’s in a terrible situation - dependent on opioids, now buying them if he can’t access his father’s supply and spending his college savings on illegal prescription medications and occasionally, when those aren’t available, heroin. His father is scheduled to be transferred to a hospice residence by week’s end. Kevin is devastated that his dad is actively dying and simultaneously terrified about how he will maintain his habit. Kevin asks himself, “Who have I become?” He’s beginning to hate himself.

Friends have noticed that Kevin seems upset, but they assume it’s because of his dad. His teachers have talked with him about his failing grades. But Kevin can’t tell anyone his truth. He’s already disappointed in himself and doesn’t want those he loves to feel the same.

1. Using content from Chapters 8, 11, and other sources, discuss Kevin’s dilemma.
2. What relational skills are needed to connect with adolescents? In Kevin’s case, how might you approach his ‘secret’? Who might you enlist to play a role in helping Kevin acknowledge and address his substance dependence?
3. Opioid and other substance use disorders are on the rise across class, age, and diverse populations yet they remain a problem steeped in silence. Discuss the role of stigma and shame in identification and treatment of substance use disorders.
4. What role do social workers and other behavioral health practitioners play in raising awareness of substance use as a growing public health concern amongst adolescents?