

An Addicted Star, Houston Wasn't Alone

By Fujimori, Sachi The Record (Bergen County, NJ), February 15, 2012

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In her final hours, Whitney Houston wandered erratically around the lobby of the Beverly Hilton Hotel. Near the end of his life, the onetime matinee idol Elvis Presley was bloated and glassy-eyed. Amy Winehouse became notorious for stuttering and slurring onstage.

And when these bright stars fell to drug and alcohol addictions, the public was devastated, but not completely surprised. With so many entertainers dying too young from substance abuse issues, it raises the question: Is addiction linked to superstardom?

"I don't think stars are more likely to get addicted than other people," said Dr. Jeffrey Berman, a board-certified addiction psychiatrist and medical director for addiction services at Bergen Regional Medical Center. "But I think the people around them tend to tolerate their behavior using drugs and alcohol."

Celebrity drug abuse draws the most public attention, said Ridgewood addiction specialist Dr. Michael Gentile, but addiction is everywhere in society. "Drug and alcohol addiction knows no boundaries - it's prevalent across the board. From my point of view, compare that to an inner city and the general population, and they're pretty much even," he added.

It's just that tales of musicians partying hard and abusing drugs and alcohol have become part of pop culture lore.

"In the arts, there's a lot of downtime," said Tenafly's Gene Bowen, who spent 15 years as a rock-and-roll road manager and addict. After cleaning up, he founded Road Recovery, a non-profit organization that unites musicians and other entertainment professionals who've battled addiction and other adversities to mentor at-risk youth. "One of the things about addiction, we need structure."

It's not just culture and environment that create an addict; there are plenty of musicians who are clean. But is there something inherent in an artist - for example, Houston's charismatic personality - that makes her want to continually get high?

Not really, according to Berman. "I think the only personality you can generalize is they have some feeling of entitlement and that they're special. Sometimes they don't feel the need to suffer feelings and want to instantly change their mood," he said.

The irony is that the rich and famous have access to the best treatment available, yet their entourages can enable their destructive behavior.

"One of the things that seems to happen with very successful people is that they are insulated and have enormous resources and a lot of people around yessing them," Bowen said. ...

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