

1977's poster boy for celebrity excess



AP file photo

Elvis Presley performs on stage in 1973. The 30th anniversary of his death is Aug. 16.

By [Diane Chun](#)
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It was 30 years ago, on Aug. 16, when Elvis Presley was found dead on the bathroom floor of his Graceland mansion in Memphis. He was 42.

Keys to addiction recovery

- You must surrender to win.
- You must suffer to get well.
- Families must practice "tough love," even if it means mandating that you get treatment.
- Programs that combine medication, behavioral therapy, can help with recovery.
- If you make the most of rehabilitation, you'll be able to cope with both addiction and the pressures of life.

- Dr. Scott Teitelbaum, UF addiction specialist

As a star whose appetite had outpaced even his own expanding waistline, Presley was 1977's poster boy for celebrity excess.

Three decades later, however, there are plenty of other young celebrities filling the pages of the tabloids and entertainment magazines with their escapades.

Now making her third visit to a rehab facility in 2007, 21-year-old actress Lindsay Lohan is also awaiting an Aug. 24 court appearance, charged with driving under the influence and possession of cocaine.

Britney Spears, who also has checked into a rehabilitation facility three times, was portrayed as out of control during a celebrity magazine photo session recently.

River Phoenix, whose family still lives near Micanopy, shot to stardom in the film "Stand By Me" while he was still a teen. Just 23, Phoenix died on the sidewalk outside the Viper Room, a Hollywood hotspot, in 1993. He had overdosed on a combination of cocaine and heroin.

Addiction specialist Scott Teitelbaum says one thing about Elvis's death is still clear today: "Our country has the biggest prescription drug problem in the world."

As head of the addiction medicine program at Shands at Vista, an inpatient facility in Gainesville, Fla., Teitelbaum knows a lot about the illegal use of drugs. He knows that anyone can abuse drugs or alcohol, but for those in the public eye, it can be exceptionally difficult to break the cycle of their own addictive behavior.

Recovering from any addiction in a fishbowl is daunting, and the National Institute on Drug Abuse points out that many of those who go through it will relapse. The most effective treatment programs use medication or behavioral therapy, sometimes both, to help with recovery.

"There are many paradoxes to getting well," Teitelbaum said. "You must surrender to win, and you must suffer to get well."

Dr. Mark Gold is chief of addiction medicine at the McKnight Brain Institute at the University of Florida. Gold would extend the definition of substance dependence to cover food addiction, saying for some, the compulsion to overeat is as strong as an addict's need for drugs.

Food and drugs of abuse compete for the brain's reward sites, according to Gold.

That would probably have come as no surprise to Elvis, whose fondness for fried peanut butter-and-banana sandwiches was well known.

Those who have chronicled Elvis's life say that under a punishing work schedule, Presley began taking a cycle of "uppers" to get him going in the morning and "downers" to allow him to sleep at night. Doctors in Los Angeles, Las Vegas or Memphis were only too happy to help the wealthy star out.

The coroner's report listed "cardiac arrhythmia" as the cause of Presley's death, which means little more than his heart stopped. In fact, Elvis died after subjecting himself to a cocktail of prescription drugs, taken in doses no doctor would prescribe. They included morphine, Demoral, codeine, Valium and Placidyl, sedatives and barbituates.

It is very hard for celebrities to get the kind of treatment for drug or alcohol abuse that is considered state-of-the-art, Gold said.

"Celebrities have managers and handlers who get paid when they are working," he explained. So they aren't directed to the sort of rehabilitation plan that an addicted physician, for example, might join.

Gold said that includes intervention, inpatient treatment, residential treatment, then long-term, five-year outpatient group treatment with urine monitoring.

"That is a lot different from a two-week celebrity spa cure followed by a press release," Gold said.

Ken Block is lead singer of the band Sister Hazel. Block and his bandmates will be on the road on the anniversary of Elvis's death, touring behind their newest CD, BAM!: Volume 1.

Sister Hazel, a Gainesville-based group, shot into the national spotlight in 1997, a year when it was hard to turn on the radio without hearing their hit song "All For You."

Block, relaxing at home recently with his wife and three children, ages 7, 4 and 2, had time to reflect about life on the road and the price of celebrity.

"When we got started, we were just a bunch of college kids. We didn't miss many parties," he said.

Life on the road as a performer is "a crazy place," Block explained. The days are long, beginning with morning radio interviews, going on to deal with CD sales in whatever city you're in, then traveling to the venue where they load you in. You do press interviews in the afternoon, then sound check, meet-and-greets, the show and after-show visits. Finally it's back on the tour bus and on to the next town.

"But when you roll into town, for the fans who live there, it's time to party and whoop it up," he said. "As the artist, you are expected to be the M.C. of the whole traveling circus."

Stinging criticism in the media often comes along with success and exposure. Block said you're always aware that you are under a microscope.

"If you do have a big hit or even a run of success, the minute that's over, the big record companies are looking at you to do it again," he said.

"You need people who care about you . . . not the accolades, the image, or the two hours you're on stage at night, but what happens to you in between and how you're handling it," he said.

Block said the five guys who make up Sister Hazel (Andrew Copeland, Ryan Newell, Mark Trojanowski, Jett Beres and himself) have been lucky in their decade in the spotlight.

"We all have supportive families and friends. The team around us have been honest, good people. Those who were not haven't lasted too long," he said.

Still, five years ago, Block said he had to decide whether "alcohol or other substances" were going to be a part of his life. Today, they are not, and Block says it has been a change for the better.

Addiction experts say that successful rehabilitation (whether you're a celebrity or the guy next door) involves the difficult task of changing a lifelong, chronic illness and gaining control over the drive for drugs or alcohol.

Once you lose control over that drive, it is very difficult to reassert it.

The first step to regaining control, Teitelbaum said, is admitting that you have hit rock bottom. And if you are a celebrity, surrounded by an entourage of enablers, it's hard to recognize bottom when you reach it.

"At bottom, rehabilitation has to be an inside job," he said. "Sometimes you have to take a hard look and decide you don't like the way you are living."

It isn't rocket science, Teitelbaum adds. Pain and emotional discomfort are what drives people to change. When friends or family shield them from that reality, change isn't likely.

Gold sees what some would call "a teachable moment" in the media frenzy over celebrity missteps. Parents can take the opportunity to help their children understand what celebrity really is and how hero worship based on prominence in the media has little to do with reality.

"The messages start early, and they start at home," Gold said.

Fortune and fame are not protective factors, he emphasized. Even the most powerful celebrities can be left powerless in the face of addiction.

"You could be First Lady Betty Ford, or Lindsay Lohan, or Darryl Strawberry, but the net result is the same," Gold said.

There is no soft, easy path to recovery, addiction experts agree.

"People do get better, but it is not a two-week job," Teitelbaum said.

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