

Matthew Perry: The power of celebrities speaking publicly about their addiction

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As the outpouring of tributes from celebrities and fans shows, the actor Matthew Perry and his Friends character, Chandler Bing, meant a huge amount to many people.

But Perry, who died suddenly at 54, [said himself](#) that he did not want to be remembered solely for his role on the sitcom: "When I die I don't want 'Friends' to be the first thing that's mentioned, I want that [helping people] to be the first thing that's mentioned. And I'm going to live the rest of my life proving that."

Perry was referring to his lifelong battle with [addiction](#) and opioids, which he documented candidly [in his autobiography](#). Having visible figures like Perry speak publicly about their struggles can challenge the social stigma of addiction and inspire people to seek treatment.

In my [research](#) and work with [drug users](#), I have explored public understandings of addiction and substance dependency. It can take years for people to seek help for addiction issues, and they often report feelings of [guilt and shame](#). Many people still associate addiction with a [lack of control and personal chaos](#), which can evoke fear in those who do not have personal experience of addiction themselves.

Perry himself subscribed to the view of addiction as a disease. He wanted people to be open and compassionate to the struggles of addiction, [describing it as](#) an adversary that is just "outside doing one-arm push-ups, waiting to get you alone."

After his passing, a clip of Perry's 2013 [Newsnight](#) debate with controversial commentator Peter Hitchens went viral. The debate focused on the topic of [specialist drug courts](#), an alternative to the normal court system, which Perry supported. Hitchens, who disagrees with the concept of addiction as a disease and describes [drug use](#) as a choice, particularly rankled Perry that night.

In his heated interaction with Hitchens, Perry made it clear that he was a person who was not afraid to stand up for others whose struggles with addiction are misunderstood. This, from someone as famous as Perry,

was a powerful moment.

Celebrities and public struggle

Perry is not the first famous person to share their personal battles and demons. Celebrity influence can be a powerful force, particularly when viewers [identify](#) with the actor or singer, or the character they play on screen.

In 1993, Diana, Princess of Wales [spoke publicly](#) about her battles with bulimia. In the years following, the number of women who sought support for bulimia [doubled](#).

Others, including [Demi Lovato](#), [Charlie Sheen](#) and [Joaquin Phoenix](#) have all discussed their battles with mental health and addiction.

Research has shown that celebrity stories can inspire behavior change when it comes to health. A celebrity [cancer diagnosis](#) can inspire people to get screened, or a public [struggle with alcohol](#) may motivate someone to seek help themselves.

This may be because of the [one-sided relationship](#) an audience has with a public figure. Fans develop a psychological and [emotional attachment](#) and may view the famous person as a friend or someone who can be trusted. Indeed, in Perry's death, many people felt they had lost a friend.

When Perry's autobiography was released in 2022, he proudly reported that several people [checked into rehab](#) after reading his book. Other fans attributed their sobriety to his inspirational [memoir](#) because Perry was a person they could identify with.

A lasting legacy

Publicly sharing experiences with addiction is a gamble, as stars may be judged and rejected by fans. Perry himself faced a [negative reaction](#) on social media during the Friends reunion in 2021.

Comments focused on his aged appearance and his "slurred" speech, possibly lasting effects of a years-long battle with addiction. It would have been easy for Perry to retire from the public view and hide his struggles.

But in his final years, Perry made clear that he wanted to use his story to help others. He demonstrated this commitment when in 2013 he converted his Malibu mansion into [Perry House](#)—a sober-living house for men in recovery.

The project ran for two years, closing due to the financial cost. Before his death, he was reportedly setting up a new [foundation](#) to support people living with substance-use issues.

While he may influence some to begin their journey to recovery, perhaps his most lasting legacy will be that he brought a [human face](#) to addiction. In a world where people still feel judged and ashamed when struggling with drugs or alcohol, Perry reminded us all that an addict is [more than their addiction](#).

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