

Is Relapse a Family Affair: Family Systems in Recovery and Relapse

By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.

Conceptualization of families as a system tells us that each person in that family influences and is influenced by every other person in that family. However, it is essential to remember that the actions of one member do not directly cause the actions of another. This is very important to remember in the case of relapses in the family. Simple cause-and-effect explanations of behavior are inadequate when addressing families, especially those in the context of substance use disorder (SUD). Families typically engage in circular patterns of behavior exchange.

The recovery of family members without substance use disorder (SUD) does not depend on the recovery of the individual with SUD. Similarly, the recovery of the individual with SUD is not contingent upon the recovery of other family members. Does the behavior or non-recovery of one member affect other family members? Absolutely. While others do not directly cause the relapse of one member, dysfunctional interaction patterns that are self-defeating and self-reinforcing often play a role in relapse.

Throughout the progression of substance use disorder, spouses, children, siblings, parents, and others experience negative impacts due to the addiction and develop symptoms as they cope with its effects. These symptoms may manifest physically, psychologically, behaviorally, and socially. They become ingrained, self-reinforcing, and can persist long after the absence of addiction in the family. For instance, survival behavior may persist across generations even if the previous generation did not experience substance use disorder.

Individuals with SUD and their non-SUD-affected loved ones sometimes assume that if the individual with SUD stops using substances and begins a recovery program, the family members will automatically recover.

However, this is not the case. The recovery of the individual with SUD does not automatically lead to the recovery of other family members. Problematic symptoms typically experienced by family members with a loved one who has substance use disorder often existed before the relationship with the individual with SUD. It's common for spouses of individuals with SUD to come from families impacted by addiction or other extremely stressful circumstances.

For a family to recover, each member must take responsibility for their well-being. Recovery for those affected by a loved one's SUD involves shifting focus from the person with SUD to promoting their individual growth and self-care. This shift entails accepting responsibility for one's decisions, emotions, behaviors, and happiness.

The process of relapse is similar for both individuals with SUD and non-SUD-affected family members. Relapse for both involves reverting to old, pre-recovery thought patterns, including defense mechanisms which create disempowering reality distortions. Common defenses related to relapse may involve blaming, rationalizing, intellectualizing, minimizing, generalizing, and denial.

A return to old thought patterns leads to a return to old emotional states and coping mechanisms, such as acting out resentments and withdrawing in self-pity. Subsequently, there's a return to old behaviors, which could include resuming previous addictions or developing new ones, such as excessive focus on religion, work, sex, relationships, or shopping. Family members often experience a relapse characterized by a renewed compulsion to excessively engage with or exert control over the individual with SUD.

The relapse of one family member does not necessarily precede relapse in others. Each individual has choices and is responsible for their recovery. It's essential for everyone to be aware of triggers and early warning signs of relapse and to take proactive steps for prevention.

Early warning signs of relapse in non-SUD-affected family members typically include poor stress management and a decline in recovery-

oriented behaviors, such as abandoning positive routines and structures or losing focus on personal goals. When family members return to focusing on the recovery or non-recovery of the individual with SUD, they often experience a resurgence of old emotional, physical, psychological, and behavioral symptoms.

For families in recovery, it's crucial to acknowledge the potential for relapse in all members and the responsibility of each person to mind their own recovery regardless of others' actions. Each family member should develop a relapse prevention plan and identify the ways they can support others in theirs without taking over.

Recognizing one's relapse symptoms can be challenging while experiencing them, but loved ones may notice them. Members should feel empowered to provide feedback to one another regarding potential relapse symptoms. A priori agreements to give feedback to each other on potential relapse symptoms can facilitate open communication.

The most effective relapse prevention involves engaging in a comprehensive recovery program, which may include participating in a twelve-step program, reading relevant literature, attending meetings, performing service work, utilizing an extensive support network, and having a sponsor. Recovery activities are beneficial for everyone in the family affected by SUD. Each individual is responsible for engaging in and monitoring their recovery efforts, attitudes, and behaviors and should be open to feedback from others.

Just as you would want your loved ones to alert you to a physical health concern like melanoma, it's crucial to be receptive to feedback regarding potential relapse symptoms. Relapse represents a return to old, dysfunctional problem-solving behaviors that can cause physical, spiritual, and emotional/psychological harm.

Remember that in family systems, each part affects every other part. During active addiction, everyone was impacted. In recovery each person is empowered to make changes in their behavior that can profoundly

impact their own life, regardless of others' actions. The interconnectedness of the family also indicates that the continued, quality recovery of one member of the family impacts the whole family.

Fostering open communication and emotional connection becomes paramount for families in recovery. Transitioning from the turmoil of active addiction to the changing lifestyles of recovery requires proactive measures. **"Family Feelings Meetings: A Brief Lesson"** offers a structured approach to family meetings, prioritizing equality, respect, and emotional expression. By embracing these core principles and implementing effective communication techniques, families can cultivate an environment conducive to healing and growth. Let Family Feelings Meetings assist you on your journey of self-discovery, mutual understanding, and lasting connection.



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