

Family Addiction Takes A Toll On The Self-Concept of Family Members

By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.

Family members are often confused about their own contributions to the family dynamics of addiction. Sometimes, they wonder if they caused the addiction. Indeed, everyone in the family is affected. The family member struggling with addiction finds that their world narrows to focus solely on their substance use, while the focus of their family members shifts to focus more on them and their behavior.

Individual and family dynamics of addiction follow a predictable progression. The use of the chemicals and its negative consequences escalate as the illness progresses. Family conflicts, anger, hurt feelings, and relationship problems, as well as more severe issues like arrests, hangovers, blackouts, mental health problems, and work problems, are some of these negative consequences.

Denial and other defense mechanisms prohibit people with substance use problems from recognizing these negative consequences, and changes in the brain prohibit appropriately addressing them. Everyone is busy trying to figure out why these problematic behaviors persist in the face of negative consequences, and family members often buy into the substance-using person's rationalizations and justifications for the problematic behavior.

Eventually, the spouse or parent discovers that the real problem is addiction and begins to try creative methods to control their impaired loved one's substance use. They sometimes persuade the struggling loved one to promise to quit, regaining some hope with each new promise, only to have it dashed with each broken promise and failed attempt.

The addicted and non-addicted spouses become locked in a struggle over the substance, and the ongoing battle comes to define their relationship. The spouse views the behavior of the struggling partner as a deliberate attempt to destroy themselves and the family. Usually by the time that a family is experiencing this level of distress, the person who has a problem is not still drinking or using for fun. The family dynamics are as distressing to them.

This struggle becomes part of the family dynamics and permeates the system's structure, function, and balance. Feelings of hurt, fear, shame, and guilt become the norm. Each spouse, locked in the struggle, blames the other for their behavior. They both feel compelled to continue the destructive interactions despite predicting the adverse outcomes. They gather resentments with each skirmish. Family members neglect their own health and welfare to double down to "fix" their loved one. They develop depression and anxiety in the process. The person with addiction fights against being controlled.

The spouse takes on increasingly more responsibilities as the other spouse becomes more disabled by their addiction. Systemic properties and family dynamics push the children toward survival roles ill-suited for positive development and thriving, but instead create vulnerability to depression, anxiety, PTSD, and addictions of their own. Survival roles and symptoms can become entrenched over time and persist into adulthood.

Each family member changes to accommodate the addiction and the evolving dynamics, usually engaging in behavior that contradicts their values. Ultimately, everyone in the family turns into someone they never wanted to be.

The pain, conflict, and walking on eggshells usually persist until one or both spouses decide to separate or seek help. Other family members may have already sought assistance or discovered that their efforts to change their struggling loved one have not worked and are unlikely to work. When a family member internalizes this awareness, they can reclaim themselves and empower their choices with knowledge and self-awareness. They can

reclaim their physical, emotional, and psychological health. **Note:** This article has been revised and edited from its original version, which was previously in 2009. The content has been updated for contemporary language and concepts, clarity and accuracy.

Building Self Esteem By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.

In understanding how addiction affects family dynamics, it's clear that the environment of constant struggle, fear, and emotional turmoil can profoundly impact the non-addicted family members' self-concept. As family members become increasingly consumed with managing the addiction, they often lose sight of their own needs, values, and identities, resulting in diminished self-esteem and a distorted self-concept. Transitioning to a proactive approach in addressing these issues, "Building Self-Esteem: A Workbook" is available to assist you in addressing these issues. It is an invaluable resource for those seeking to reclaim their self-worth and sense of self. This workbook provides practical exercises and strategies designed to help individuals rebuild their self-esteem, understand their intrinsic value, and develop healthier relationships with themselves and others. By engaging with this workbook, non-addicted family members can begin to heal from the emotional scars left by addiction, rediscover their strengths, and cultivate a positive and resilient self-concept.



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