

# **Family Dynamics of Addiction And Recovery: Treatment for Spouses And Other Family Members**

**By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.**

One of the most common questions I hear from family members is, "Why do I need to be in counseling when my spouse is the one with an alcohol problem? Family members often believe that if their loved one quit doing whatever they do, it would solve their problems. The spouse's loss of sleep, headaches, stomach problems, emotional eating, isolation, concentration problems, depression, and preoccupation with what the person with a drinking problem might be doing, will not necessarily be remedied by the sobriety of another person. Sometimes, when you are so focused on the impairment of another family member, you don't connect your own physical and emotional symptoms to your lack of self-care.

Often, when family members do enter treatment, they are primarily motivated to "help" the person with an addiction. Initially, the idea that spouses and other relatives need help for their own issues can feel like an insult. It is not an insult for others to acknowledge that non-addicted loved ones require assistance because they are adversely affected by the illness of a loved one. Since addiction often runs through generations in families, many spouses and other concerned family members have had previous experiences with addiction in the family. Commonly, the non-addicted spouse has been negatively affected by alcoholism before this spouse. The presence of addiction in one's family of origin increases the likelihood of marrying someone who has or will have a substance use disorder. The spouse brings their own addiction-related issues into the marriage. Seeking treatment allows family members to identify and address these individual issues. Having an addiction in your family of origin does not mean that you are responsible for a spouse's addiction.

Non-addicted loved ones invariably experience pain and suffering amid addiction. To cope with the worsening impact of a family member's

substance use disorder, they do whatever is deemed necessary for family survival. The survival behavior of spouses and other family members contributes to unhealthy patterns of relating and compulsively ineffective problem-solving. Much like the person with addiction, the spouse often finds themselves turning into someone they never wanted or intended to become. They suffer emotionally, physically, and spiritually, mirroring the person with addiction's decline.

An empowering aspect of treatment for non-addicted family members is realizing that they did not cause the addiction and that their ineffective efforts to fix it will continue to be so. Understanding that it's not their fault and that they can't control or fix someone else's addiction allows them to refocus on what they can control—their own lives. By taking care of self, family members can recover their own health, happiness, and control over their lives.

By disengaging from the minutiae of a family member's substance use problems, individuals can step back, observe, and identify opportunities, often during crises, to offer assistance for finding recovery when it is most likely to be accepted. Family members improving their health and well-being are well-placed to support their significant others in finding recovery. Relationships with individuals actively pursuing personal growth and development provide recovery capital, enhancing the likelihood of achieving and maintaining sobriety.

Often, the family member is at their wit's end trying to figure out what to do about their loved one's substance use disorder and seek help first. Those early efforts can set the stage for an impact spanning generations. Recovery efforts in one generation can positively impact future generations, setting in motion a "legacy of recovery." Entire families can embark on a recovery journey, starting with one courageous and determined individual.

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