

Family Members Know That You Are Going To Relapse In Your Addiction Before You Do. Listen Up!

By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.

The trajectory of the family recovery process is seldom straightforward. Relapse in the family member with addiction is often a gradual process that profoundly impacts loved ones. Family members who have invested time and effort in supporting that loved one throughout their active addiction years find their hopes shattered when relapse occurs.

Partners and parents are particularly affected by their loved one's relapse. Understandably, they experience frustration and anger. Those family members working on their own recovery process typically feel hurt and let down while trying not to take responsibility for the relapse or for fixing it. Despite intellectually understanding that they cannot control their loved one's sobriety, they may blame themselves for relinquishing their vigilance and allowing the relapse to occur.

Early warning signs often precede a relapse. Spouses or parents may recall observing various indicators signaling an impending relapse and may have attempted to communicate these concerns to their loved one. However, people with substance use disorder are often hard-pressed to identify and acknowledge these signs. They may perceive such feedback as criticism or attempts at control. This miscommunication usually leads to escalating conflicts within families.

Even before the beleaguered loved one takes the alcohol or other drug, conflicts arise over a return to old ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving. Family members experience and express a great deal of concern about their loved one spending time with old acquaintances associated with substance use. The person who is in the process of relapse views this

observation and feedback as an accusation and an attempt to control. They may even use the conflict as a justification for using (e.g., "If you think I'm going to use, I might as well.")

These dynamics are commonplace in recovering families that are dealing with the relapse process. Simply put, relapse involves returning to old thinking, feeling, and behaving patterns. Family members often recognize the signs of impending relapse long before the recovering person does.

The relapse process follows predictable patterns and is preventable. Despite understanding that addiction is a chronic, relapsing illness, spouses and parents may find themselves bewildered and frustrated by their loved one's repeated return to the use of the substance. Family members may even perceive their loved one's relapse to be intentional and deliberately destructive, viewing their assurances of sobriety as hollow in light of their behavior.

It's common for family members to perceive the signs of impending relapse. At the same time, the person with substance use disorder remains oblivious, believing they are in control—their assertion of their commitment to sobriety clashes with observable relapse process behaviors.

Removing relapse behavior and replacing it with recovery activities and behavior is all that will reassure concerned relatives. Verbal assurances pale compared to tangible evidence of recovery through healthy lifestyle choices. For instance, engaging in activities such as attending support meetings, practicing relaxation techniques, exercising, and maintaining open communication demonstrate commitment to recovery.

Family members learn to trust their intuition and set boundaries in their own recovery journeys. They are not obligated to engage their loved one in a tug-of-war over the truth. Ultimately, family members decide what behaviors and conditions they will or will not tolerate. Establishing a written recovery contract with detailed permissions for expressing concerns, identifying triggers, defining sobriety expectations, and outlining bottom lines may be in the family's best interest.

The involvement of significant others is crucial in supporting ongoing abstinence and preventing relapse. Family members can often see signs of impending relapse before the person with substance use disorder, and open communication about these observations serves everyone's best interest. **Note: This article has been revised and edited from its original version, which was previously published on this site in 2009. The content has been updated for contemporary language, clarity and accuracy."**



Transitioning from the intricate dynamics of family members grappling with the complexities of addiction relapse, we pivot to a proactive approach to enhancing communication skills within these familial settings. The shared adventure of addiction recovery has many challenges, and effective communication becomes paramount in navigating these tumultuous waters. **Communication Skills 101: Using 'I' Messages for Positive Interactions** is a Brief Lesson that seeks to empower the people within your family with the tools necessary to enhance communication skills. "I" messages are the cornerstone of healthy interaction, capable of revolutionizing familial dynamics.

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