

From Struggle to Strength: How Families Can Confront Addiction

By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.

Families at the brink often reach out for counseling when they find themselves facing the stark reality of a loved one's addiction and can no longer live with it. Family members often experience trauma and seek help when "reality" sets in and "the problem" can no longer be attributed to something else. Sometimes, family members seek help independently, having exhausted all efforts to convince the individual struggling with substance abuse to modify their behavior or quit altogether. At this stage, the family system is usually profoundly impacted, and the well-being of non-addicted members is showing a pronounced decline.

As the family adjusts to the presence of substance use disorder, survival behaviors and roles develop. Individual members and family dynamics change to accommodate the changes in the person whose life is becoming more and more controlled by substances, whether it is alcohol or other drugs. Family members, especially spouses, report shifts in their personalities and behaviors that they find unsettling, leading to self-dislike and a sense of not recognizing themselves anymore. It's a common experience for family members to feel like they are losing control of themselves and even question their own sanity. Seeking professional help begins to be perceived as a necessity when they think they've run out of options, often driven by a desire to gain insights into how to address the challenges posed by their addicted loved one.

In the typical pattern of family dynamics affected by addiction, some family members, particularly those most impacted by the substance user, attempt to use reason and logic to persuade the substance-using loved one to acknowledge the destructive nature of their actions and to stop using. However, addiction defies reason and logic, leaving family members frustrated as their efforts repeatedly fail.

Once family members overcome denial about addiction being the root cause of the problem, they often grapple with confusion and anger as the

chemically dependent individual remains in denial about their addiction. The family members struggle to comprehend how the individual cannot see the negative consequences unfolding or seems indifferent to other impending crises.

When family members reach a point of utter bewilderment or personal misery, they may leave the relationship, threaten to leave or seek help. When family members do seek professional help, they usually do so to figure out what to do about the loved one who is becoming more and more disabled by their substance use. They want help to guide the loved one toward acknowledging their destructive path and taking the necessary steps to stop it. Family members anticipate the professional will possess the magic words to make the loved one change or to teach family members how to make them change. This juncture can be termed the "Getting Them Sober" phase. While the substance-using loved one may not be willing to attend counseling at this point, the crisis or realization that motivated the family member to seek help provides a crucial opportunity to intervene with the whole system by assisting the willing family members.

Interventions with family members during this stage typically involve education on addiction, processing emotions, dispelling myths, and empowering family members to make decisions from a position of strength rather than desperation. Counselors educate them on fundamental addiction concepts, explaining the progression of addiction, its symptoms, and its impact on relationships, judgment, and emotions. Counseling assists in recognizing the ill-fated problem-solving strategies (including enabling) for "fixing" their loved ones and learning to harness their fundamental strengths to change how they deal with the problem.

Counseling does not blame the family or family members for substance use disorder in one of its members. It does teach strategies for breaking out of destructive, self-reinforcing family dynamics that help sustain family member decline. Family members have an opportunity in counseling to understand how substance use disorder creates or aggravates adverse physical, emotional, psychological, behavioral, and spiritual responses in family members and how to practice new behavior that mitigates the destructive impact on them. Family members learn to replace counter-productive responses with proactive problem-solving based on strengths.

They gain insights into letting go with love and enhancing effective communication. Importantly, they learn to leverage the natural negative consequences of the behavioral corollaries of substance use disorder to facilitate intervention and treatment.



"Signs and Symptoms of Substance Use Disorder: How to Know if Your Loved One Needs Help," is a Brief Lesson by Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D. This power-point-type presentation provides crucial information for developing the understanding you need in dealing with substance use disorder. It provides information on the signs and symptoms of substance use disorder, as well as tips on how to approach a loved one who may be struggling with addiction. This digital download is available immediately.

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