

Addiction As Disease Does Not Equal” Get Out of Jail Free”

By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.

Sometimes, family members struggle with the concept that addiction is, in part, a brain disorder. The resistance to the idea of addiction as a disease often relates to the issue of responsibility. They may believe that viewing problematic behavior as an illness equates to a "get out of jail free card" or not being held accountable. Immunity to accountability is not the case.

Someone with an illness is responsible for choosing recovery over doing nothing, which usually ensures that the situation will worsen. Those with a severe substance use disorder, significant enough for family members to notice its impact, are responsible for identifying the problem and taking action to prevent further damage. They must do whatever is necessary to attain and maintain sobriety after breaking the addiction cycle by quitting drinking, using drugs, or engaging in addictive behaviors like gambling or sexual addiction. They are also accountable for the inappropriate and devastating behavior in active addiction.

One of the overarching tasks and goals of early recovery is to take responsibility for that recovery and for the devastation caused by the addiction. Assuming responsibility is crucial to gaining insight despite denial and other defense mechanisms, finding a new direction in life, and developing the living skills needed to recover.

Family members are naturally "irked" by the idea that the person becoming more and more disabled by their addiction gets off the hook for their behavior due to the illness. The truth is that in recovery, sometimes for the first time, they are being held accountable. They have to be responsible for their behavior to recover. The same is true for family members. There is often a great deal of maladaptive behavior involved in the family dynamics of addiction, and each family member must take responsibility for their own feelings, decisions, and behavior.

While spouses and parents are trying to solve the problem of addiction by making their loved one change, they often end up enabling them with those problem-solving attempts. Family members usually tolerate intolerable behavior and situations over a long period, lose themselves in the process, and yet depend on the person with an addiction to step up and make it all right. Even when they become abstinent, the beleaguered loved one cannot make it all right. It is an eye-opening discovery when the family members realize they have invested all their time, energy, and other resources in the development, nurturance, or reclamation of the person with an addiction and have neglected their own choices, decisions, and behavior in the addiction process—just like the person with addiction does.

One of the patterns that leads to this is the circular blaming by all involved. The person with addiction blames family members for their unhappiness, pain, and problems in their lives. Family members often believe them for a long time. These well-meaning relatives typically feel compelled to engage in inappropriate caretaking or coercion of the loved one struggling with addiction, trying to get them to straighten up. They can't see the direct parallel between the compulsion to fix the loved one and the afflicted loved one's compulsion to "use" the mood-altering chemical. The family member often gets to the point where they blame the person with addiction for their own choices, saying, "I had to do ____ because you did ____." The reality is that both had choices and responsibility for those choices each step of the way. Addiction negatively affects everyone in the family. No one escapes unscathed. The good news is that everyone involved in the scenario above can recover, regardless of whether the other does. Individual recovery, again, is based on choices and responsibility for one's own decisions.

Undoubtedly, the inappropriate behavior of the afflicted loved one hurts family members. The dishonesty, the inability to be emotionally present, or the failure to engage in adult responsibilities with emotional maturity is often part and parcel of addiction. Family members are justifiably angry about addiction-related behavior. If they have much insight into addiction, they are appropriately concerned about the continuation of the drug or alcohol use and the problematic behavior.

Recovery is a process that occurs over a long period. When a person with an addiction enters recovery by stopping the consumption of alcohol or other drugs, things can begin to get better. However, abstinence is only the very, very beginning of recovery. There is much work to be done.

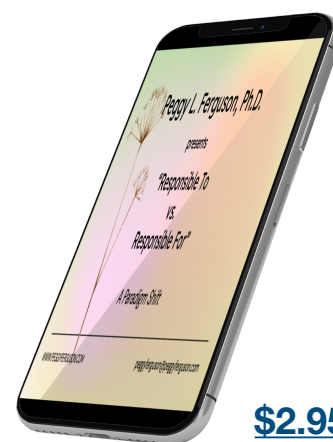
Affected relatives must also take action for their own recovery. Family members do not recover by being non-involved bystanders or by continuing to over-invest in the loved one's versus their recovery. Any person's recovery is contingent upon taking responsibility for that recovery. Relationships can also recover from the damage of addiction in the family as each person works on their issues. By attending to their problems and working a recovery program, each person can find peace and serenity that is not dependent on what the other is doing or not doing.

Ultimately, spouses choose whether they are willing to remain in a relationship without a guarantee of a happy ending. Relapse, a common symptom of all addictions and all chronic illnesses, is certainly a possibility. Each person must find their way in recovery, gaining insight, and changing at their own pace. Sometimes, spouses get tired of waiting for changes that are not forthcoming, decide that they "have had enough," and choose to get out. In some cases, that action represents responsibility for self-care and recovery. **Note: This article has been revised and edited from its original version, which was previously published in 2009 on this site. The content has been updated for contemporary language and concepts, clarity and accuracy.**

Responsibility To vs. Responsibility For

By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.

To further explore the concept of responsibility in addiction and recovery, consider the Brief Lesson, "Responsible To vs. Responsible For: A Paradigm Shift." This concise and informative PowerPoint presentation teaches the art of shifting your thinking from "Being Responsible For" to "Being Responsible To." This shift fosters mutual respect and empowerment in your relationships, offering a practical template for approaching difficult conversations authentically and straightforwardly. Understanding and applying this simple yet profound shift in thinking can lead to healthier, more harmonious connections. Shift your thinking and approach today by "Being Responsible To."



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