

Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

# Rebuilding Relationships in Families Affected by Addictions

Alcoholism and drug addictions affect people in many different ways. Not only do these problems touch several aspects of the substance abuser's life, they also significantly affect the people who are close to them. For example, families of people addicted to alcohol or drugs may try as best they can to accommodate that person's behavior and, as a result, will develop certain particular ways of functioning and interacting.

Communication between family members and the way in which responsibilities are shared within the family are two aspects of family life that are greatly influenced by the presence of an addicted individual in the family.

Communication is extremely important in any relationship and family relationships are no exception. Families affected by addictions are often characterized by an avoidant style of communication: many topics are taboo, problems are frequently denied or "hushed up"—quite literally. Denial, in fact, may become the first response to any difficulty that arises, whether related to the addiction or not. Silence becomes a way of life in the family. Feelings—especially so-called negative ones—cannot be expressed and validated, which isolates family members from one another and frequently, from their own emotions.

As a result of problematic issues being left unmentioned and therefore unresolved, situations tend to deteriorate and problems become increasingly difficult to solve. When something goes wrong, much energy goes into blaming and accusing, instead of constructively talking and problem-solving. Real discussion rarely takes place. Because open communication is so rare in families affected by addiction, individuals living in such families may have a hard time understanding each other and finding ways to meet the needs of most of its members. Relationships between family members therefore tend to be distant and unsatisfying.

Families affected by addiction also differ in the way in which responsibilities are assigned to family members. Typically, not much is asked or expected from the substance abusing individual, so other family members wind up taking on more than their share of the work. This, of course, is especially problematic when the addicted person is one of the parents. In such situations, a child is often forced to behave like an adult, perhaps even having to be a parent to an adult and other children—which can be a very heavy burden and have long-lasting emotional and behavioral effects.

How can families affected by addiction work on developing a healthier way of relating to one another? Simply put, family members have to learn not to let the addiction dictate how they will behave. Even in cases in which the substance abusing stops, family members still have to work hard at finding new ways of communicating and sharing responsibilities: the "old" ways will not simply disappear.

For example, to improve the quality of communication, families need to develop skills allowing the productive discussion of problems so that solutions are identified and can be applied. Denial can no longer be accepted: the family and each individual member has to co-operate to create an atmosphere in which feelings can be expressed freely. Trust in other family members will most likely increase as each person is made to feel that his or her experience is considered valuable and is taken into consideration by others. This change may take some time. People who have consistently been silenced will find it difficult at first to open up and might be afraid of not being understood or accepted. Professional help

may sometimes be necessary to ease into this major transition.
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As for the sharing of responsibilities within the family, each family member's contribution should be consistent with what he or she is capable of doing. Children should not be expected to play adult roles. They should feel that they can depend on their parents and not the other way around. However, after all of the disappointments and empty promises, it may be extremely difficult for people living with a substance-abusing individual to learn to trust him or her with certain responsibilities. Families need to gradually work on that issue and openly talk about all the fears involved. Expectations also need to be discussed and modified as the family situation evolves. Parents who have not participated equally in their children's education need to start working as a team. They will have to find some common ground, and learn to stand united in front of their kids. In practice, this new arrangement might be more difficult to adjust to for the parent who used to bear most of the parental responsibility before. As burdensome as it was, it might feel more complicated to now have to consider another person's point of view.

Family members all need to remember that one can only change one's own behavior, not that of others. Always, it is more helpful to focus on the present, the future and one's own goals than on the past. In families affected by addiction, relationships can be improved with patience and hard work. Recovery takes time, but is well worth the effort.