

**Early Addiction Recovery:
Essential Things You Need to Know For
Your Marriage To Survive Recovery
By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.**

The first year of addiction recovery is often cited as the most difficult period of time in recovery-not just because early recovery is so fragile and the probability of relapse is greatest-but because relationships change in early recovery. Many marriages that survived decades of alcohol/drug addiction, do not survive early recovery.

The alcoholic/addict is making major changes in the first year of recovery and family members still feel neglected and unimportant. As the alcoholic/addict struggles to maintain sobriety, regroup with work and career goals, and recapture a positive sense of self, the spouse or other family member is usually still smarting over past hurts. They observe the alcoholic focusing on their own recovery and issues and wonder when they will carve out some time and attention for the family.

Family members who have picked up the slack as the addict has abdicated more and more responsibilities within the family, may now be expecting the recovering addict to reclaim those responsibilities. Once the drinking/using has stopped, family members expect the addict to be the person that they always want him/her to be. Family members may not even know that they hold this expectation, and are often confused by their anger at the addict over not changing fast enough, working a good enough program, or not accepting enough responsibilities.

Family members may also have the hidden expectation that the addict in recovery will be able to say or do something that will erase all the pain caused by the addiction. They think that when the addict "makes amends in the proper way" by being sorry enough, or really understanding how the family member feels, that it will take away the pain.

Although family members harbor these hidden expectations, they fear talking to the recovering person about them. They fear that such a discussion could cause a relapse in the addict. The fear is often rooted in memories of past behaviors and discussions.

Sometimes when they try to talk about the issues, the addict gets defensive and wants to leave the past in the past, and not dwell on old hurts and angers. The addict often does not want to hear about the pain of the family members brought about by his/her addiction because it hurts to hear it. The addict usually carries around a great deal of shame and guilt about having the addiction, about things that they did in the addiction, especially misdeeds involving loved ones. They still have denial and defenses that have kept the extent of the pain caused by the addiction to not be fully revealed to them.

Alcoholics/addicts often have skill deficits that keep them from effectively communicating and problem solving, or even identifying and managing feelings. Couples in recovery are often handicapped in problem solving on important issues because they

operate from this skill deficit position and from a history of failed attempts. These failed attempts create more emotional debris that gets in the way and makes it more difficult the next time that they try to solve that same problem. As a result, the recovering couple is often trying to resolve old relationship issues that they have been unsuccessful in resolving. They may also be struggling over changes in power in the relationship, which may further hamper resolution.

In the midst of all the changes occurring in early recovery, relationships and families seek to regain a certain equilibrium or balance. Recovering couples and families struggle to redefine relationships, to restore old roles, responsibilities and power in the relationship(s). Sometimes it is not quite so simple or easy for the family member who has taken on all the addict's roles and responsibilities to give them back. The addict trying to regain their roles and responsibilities can be experienced as a threat to the family member.

The recovering addict may still be acting irresponsibly, continuing to lie, or continuing to be completely self-absorbed and narcissistic. The recovering person may, according to the perception of the family member, that they care little about the needs or feelings of others. The recovering person may want to be rewarded for the extreme sacrifice of giving up the chemical. Family members struggle to understand this line of thinking, hopefully watching and waiting for the recovering person to step up to the plate and take care of business-without being asked, bribed or rewarded for doing so. So, often the family has different expectations for the addict in recovery than the addict does. Often when this happens, the addict still feels controlled. Family members still feel taken for granted, taken advantage of, and often manipulated.

The newly recovering addict may also be making new friends and relationships and this can be threatening as well. The addict may not be as dependent as they were in active addiction. As they return to their previous level of functioning (or even higher), they may be growing past the level of functioning of the family member.

Another factor that threatens the relationship in early recovery is the extreme emotional ups and downs that the addict experiences. In trying to figure out what is going on with all this emotion, and with figuring out how they ended up where they are, the addict often questions their feelings about the marriage-whether they love their spouse, or even whether they ever loved their spouse. Addicts in early recovery often think about, or actually act upon, leaving their spouse.

The non-addicted family member often experiences a similar reaction, with trying to figure out if there is anything left that they have in common, or if too much damage has been done to the relationship. Family members may even feel that now that the addict is clean and can take care of himself/herself, that they are free to leave them. Or family members may be overwhelmed with a fear of relapse and think that they will never stay clean and sober.

Other stressors on the newly recovering marriage could include the unrepaired damage of the disease including legal problems, financial problems, career and work problems, unresolved anger and resentment among the in-laws-all of these want repair or resolution at a time when couples are often least equipped to resolve them. So often, the recovering addict and the family member have the expectation that when the using stops, everything will just fall into place. In most circumstances, nothing could be further from the truth. Being armed with knowledge about the typical difficulties of the marriage in early recovery, empowers a couple to begin to problem solve and work through those difficulties. Marriages strengthened by recovery of the members can ultimately be among the healthiest, happiest, and most secure marriages. But first, they have to make it past early recovery.

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