

**Family Addiction Take A Toll  
On The Self-Concept of  
Non-addicted Family Members  
By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.**

A question that I have received on more than one occasion for my column, "Ask Peggy", is about why the non-addicted family member ends up becoming someone that s/he doesn't even like. Family members are often confused about their own contribution to the family dynamics of addiction.

The answer is that alcoholism and other drug addiction is a disease that affects the entire family. Addiction takes a toll on each family member, not just the addict.

An addict's world becomes smaller and smaller as his or her lens focuses in on the relationship with the chemical. A lot of an addict's time is spent on getting the chemical, using it, and recovering from using it. Family member focus shifts more and more to the addict and his/her behavior.

Individual and family dynamics of addiction take a predictable course of progression. As the addict applies chemical coping to a broader spectrum of life's problems, amount, frequency, tolerance, and negative consequences all increase. Some of the negative consequences that begin to occur are family conflicts, anger and hurt feelings, and relationship problems. Other negative consequences that may be occurring include arrests, hangovers, blackouts, mental health problems, work problems.

Negative consequences are not obvious to the addict. Making the connection between the drinking/drugging and these consequences is prevented by denial and other defense mechanisms.

The evolving dynamics of addiction that develop as family members deal with the addiction and its negative consequences are also predictable. Family members initially believe the rationalizations, distortions, explanations, and justifications for inappropriate behavior. Long before the problem is correctly identified, the family is hard at work trying to solve the problem. They try reasonable, rational, problem solving techniques that do not work on addiction. Much of the time they have identified "the problem" as depression, ADD/ADHD, not having the right job, low self-esteem, etc. The things they do to solve the problems often serve as "enabling" rather than actual problem solving.

Eventually the spouse or parent discovers that the real problem is addiction and begins to try to modify the addict's drinking or using. They may feel compelled to take control in the obvious absence of the addict's control. These family members get quite creative (and manipulative) in their efforts to change the alcoholic. They get the addict to promise to quit. Family members regain some hope with each new promise, only to have it dashed with each broken promise and failed attempt to quit or stay quit.

The addicted and non-addicted spouses get locked into a struggle over the chemical. This ongoing battle comes to define and characterize their relationship. The non-addicted spouse views the addict's behavior as a deliberate attempt to destroy himself and the family.

The ongoing struggle becomes a part of the family dynamics, and gets incorporated into the structure, function, and balance of the system. Feelings of hurt, fear, shame, guilt become the norm. Each spouse, locked into the struggle blames the other for his or her own behavior.

As the addict becomes more and more disabled by the addiction, the non-addicted spouse takes on most of the roles in the family. The children are often recruited to help. The family operates in survival mode most of the time.

The children take on stereotypical survival roles. These survival roles are chosen or assigned according to personality characteristics, birth order, and family structure. The roles tend to become entrenched in each child over time and can persist into adulthood. These survival roles serve several purposes in the family-- mostly to reduce the tension and pain in one way or another.

As the family system changes to accommodate the changes in the addict and in the family dynamics, family members often find themselves engaging in behavior that is outside their value systems. Ultimately non-addicted family members also turn into someone they never wanted to be.

The pain, the conflict, and the walking around on eggshells usually persists for some time, often until the one or both of the two battling spouses decide to separate. This change often signals a crisis that is enough to motivate the addict to seek treatment, help, and recovery. The other family members may have already sought assistance, or they may have discovered that their efforts to make the addict change simply have not worked and are not likely to work in the future. When a family member internalizes this awareness s/he is able to "detach".

Family members operate under the belief that when the addict stops drinking or using that all the problems in the family will be solved. They believe that if the addict can just quit drinking or using, or at least quit having the negative consequences of his/her drinking and using, that everything will be alright. This is usually not the case.

The first year of recovery is often a very difficult time, not only for the recovering alcoholic/addict, but for the family as well.

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