

“Let’s Get Them Sober” as a Starting Place For Family Members of Alcoholics/Addicts

By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.

One of the most frequent requests for counseling from family members of chemically dependent persons occurs when the addiction is at a point in its progression and seriousness that the problem can no longer be denied or explained away as some other problem. Family members seek help by themselves when they have tried everything to get the alcoholic person to “cut down”, otherwise modify their drinking/using behavior, change their behavior and demeanor when impaired, or to quit all together. At this point the family syndrome of addiction is in full swing and the functioning of non-addicted members is deteriorating.

Families adjust to the chemical dependency within the system and begin to move into survival behaviors and roles. Family members often report that their personalities and behavior are changing in ways that they dislike and that they come to hate themselves or to not even know themselves any more. Family members often think that they are going crazy. They seek help when they are at the end of their rope. Typically, they seek professional help to gain information on how actually accomplish straightening out their alcoholic significant other.

Part of the predictable patterns of family dynamics of addiction involves those family members who are most affected by the drinker, using reason and logic to try to talk the alcoholic into “seeing” the error of his/her ways, and to stop drinking. They try to solve an unreasonable and illogical problem with reason and logic. Addiction often defies reason and logic. Family members become perplexed and bewildered as to why these techniques have repeatedly failed and have sometimes seemed to make matters worse.

Family members naturally feel compelled to try to save their significant others from destruction. Having moved out of some denial about addiction being the source of the problem, the family member is often confused and angry that the chemically dependent person is still in denial about being addicted. They have a hard time understanding how the alcoholic cannot see the negative consequences of the addiction all around him/her. They are totally perplexed that the alcoholic does not even seem to care that s/he is heading for the abyss.

When family members get to the point where they are totally baffled by the disease and/or they are miserable themselves, they often seek help. Family members often enlist the aid of a professional to help their significant other “see” that s/he is truly headed for the destruction and what has to be done to stop it. They often believe that the professional will have just the right thing to say that will get their significant other to straighten up. This juncture is the “Getting Them Sober” juncture. They may seek help alone initially or may call to set up an appointment for their significant other who may not have any intention of attending.

Although the alcoholic may not make it in to counseling at this point, it is a great opportunity to intervene with the non-addicted significant other. Intervention with family members, at this point usually involves teaching about addiction, processing feelings, dismissing myths, and empowering family members to make decisions based on strength

rather than desperation. Counselors will usually teach on basic addiction concepts such as addiction's progression, its symptoms, its affects on relationships, its affects on judgement and feelings. Counselors will teach on the dynamics of interaction among family members that serves to help perpetuate the drinking, how to interrupt that pattern, and how to take care of themselves in the midst of the crises and chaos. Family members usually discover that they have been enabling and learn how to stop enabling (with a minimum of guilt). They learn how to let go with love, and how to communicate effectively. They can learn how to utilize the timing of natural negative consequences of the disease to offer interventions and treatment.

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