

**Dynamics of Addiction and Recovery –
Regaining Trust in Early Recovery
By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.**

A common question that I hear from people at the beginning of recovery from addiction is about how to get their loved ones to trust them again. This is often a premature question, when the newly abstinent person is in the very early stages of change. They often want credit from family members about their "intentions" toward recovery. They may want to be recognized and rewarded for being willing to quit drinking and using at day two or three of abstinence. They may forget that they have repeatedly made it several days in a row without drinking or using before relapsing once again.

The newly recovering person often wants family members to accept at face value that they are done with drinking and using for good. They may be telling the partner or family members that they are willing to go to 12 step meetings, but one thing after another has gotten in the way of actually attending those meetings. From the addict's point of view, the willingness and the intention of doing so should be accepted and regarded as evidence that the alcoholic is "in recovery".

Alcoholics may feel insulted when it is suggested that for family members to believe that they have changed, that they actually must change. Words are not enough. Family members have been through promises and declarations of "quitting for good" for years. These verbalizations do not mean anything to the family if not followed by behavior change.

Family members often assert that their addicted loved ones have lied to them about wanting to get sober or by making unfulfilled promises of "giving it up". People with addiction usually mean it when they make the promises that they will quit, that they will go to meetings, and that they will engage in any form of recovery activities. The addiction gets in the way of the promises to themselves and others. The cravings or urges set in and the defenses mechanisms make it alright to drink or use "just one", "just one more time", "only for today", "only beer", or "only pot". And of course, the first one only leads to the rest.

Addiction is an illness that plays tricks with your thinking. A psychological tug of war between the side that wants to quit and the other side that wants to use is played out in the mind of the addict, as they deal with cravings. Both sides have their arguments to gain supremacy. The battle is ongoing; thoughts are fluid; resolve changes minute by minute.

The newly recovering person often has difficulty really understanding that family members will regain their trust as the alcoholic regains "trustworthiness". Behavior, that is dependable, responsible, constant, and predictable, is trustworthy behavior. Trust comes back the same way it was lost-a little at a time. As the addict does what he says he will do (i.e., going to meetings, not drinking one day at a time, getting a sponsor, etc.)

family members' perception of his "trustworthiness" goes up. When he tells the truth instead of lying to avoid conflict, his "trustworthiness" rating goes up some more. This process continues as the trust in the relationship is restored. All the arguing and promising in the world won't make it happen sooner. In fact, this behavior slows down the process since it is not "recovery behavior".

Family members will also be reassured about a loved one's ongoing abstinence when they observe that the appearance of new living skills. The chemical must be replaced by healthy living skills or the recovering person remains vulnerable to relapse. When the chemical use is removed from the newly sober person's problem solving skill set, it leaves big gaping holes where something that had a purpose used to be. When the need arises for the role that the chemical played, and healthy replacements have not been found, relapse is a strong possibility. Spouses and parents in early recovery live in fear of their loved one relapsing. They feel less fear when they are able to observe that their loved one now has alternatives to chemicals when he feels uncomfortable feelings, is stressed, or has problems that he is struggling with.

An example of the need for living skills would be stress. Addicts without stress management skills, in the wake of elevated stress, would want to use a drug to manage that stress because at some point it worked--at least temporarily. Recovering people not practicing good stress management skills would tend to be irritable, anxious, and might employ other diversionary tactics to not feel stressed. Spouses and parents will notice when a loved one is practicing stress management skills because their old behavior associated with stress will be changed. They will see that the alcoholic is changed and is engaged in working a program of recovery.

"Working a program" is not just about attending meetings. It is about utilizing what you learn in those meetings to effectively manage one's life. To regain trust in the relationship one must actively work a program of recovery.

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