

Family Dynamics of Recovery: Establishing Interdependent Relationships and Learning to Be Healthy
By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.

Growing up in an addicted family creates a host of interpersonal and "intrapersonal" conflicts. One of the most common, yet complex conflicts acquired in an addicted family is the intrapersonal conflict over the need for dependence and independence.

Remembering that alcoholic or other addictive families create a climate where stability and consistency is nonexistent. Children are dependent on the family for developing a clear sense of individuality and self-esteem. They are dependent on the physical and emotional resources of the family. They are dependent on the family for learning how to recognize and process feelings. If there are no consistent resources available in the home for these characteristics and skills to be established, the child grows up knowing that they cannot depend on others to have their needs met. They learn to be "independent" and to rely on themselves-in some ways. In other ways, they don't believe that they can really depend on their own skills, perceptions, or feelings, because they have also learned not to trust these characteristics in self. Not trusting their own inherent worth, they seek out partners with potential, so that they can invest their own resources in the development of their significant other.

Children growing up in alcoholic homes are frequently plagued with anxiety, self-doubt, and inability to make decisions. Sometimes when people from dysfunctional families find their way into recovery, they grab hold of some basic knowledge about enabling and the need to stop that. They learn that it is important to be assertiveness and "independent", so they try to eliminate dependent behavior. Those just beginning to heal from family addiction, do the opposite of what they have learned to do in their childhood, believing that to be recovery. Some move from extreme dependency to extreme independence or "counter-dependence". In reality, counter-dependence does not equal "independence".

Counter-dependency looks very independent on the surface, but is a response to fear of dependency needs. If those recuperating from dysfunctional family systems apply themselves long enough and hard enough, they will ultimately come to a point somewhere in the middle on the "dependence/independence" continuum. Somewhere in the middle is "interdependency". This is the healthy place for individual identity and relationship behavior. Growth, as marked on a continuum, involves movement across the various points on the line between the extreme ends.

Resolving the independence/dependence conflict means moving from the "extreme" dependency position of inappropriate caretaking and enabling to cooperative problem solving about relationship issues. It means moving from "giving" to feel safe in the relationship to "giving" to feel the joy of giving. It means moving away from obsession and pre-occupation with the feelings and behavior of others into conscious responsibility of one's own reactions, feelings, and behavior. People in recovery stop

trying to meet the imagined expectations of others. They learn to identify and meet their own reasonable expectations of self. They stop anticipating the needs of others while ignoring their own needs.

As people strive for independence and self-efficacy, and move into health, they do not ignore or trample on the feelings and needs of others. They practice respect and courtesy, while caring about the needs and feelings of others without taking control or responsibility for them.

Healthy interaction with others involves a change from being responsible for others, to being responsible to them. That involves being honest and real with others about what you see and what you feel in regard to their behavior.

In the process of being responsible for one's own health, wealth, and happiness, the healthy, "interdependent" person can cooperatively participate in relationships. To cooperate does not mean to be a door mat, but to be flexible while maintaining appropriate boundaries. Mending actually means being able to engage in cooperative, mutually satisfying relationships, where giving is done freely without resentment and hidden expectations. Healthy people can be themselves, while allowing others to be themselves. Healthy people don't "build walls". They set and maintain "proper boundaries". Walls create isolation and loneliness. Boundaries create empowerment. Healthy people can take life's challenges in stride and deal with problems as they occur. They perceived themselves to be generally competent.

In relationships, they can accept positive criticism from others. They tend to be optimistic with life events, finding within those events, opportunities for growth. They have positive expectations about their relationships with others. They expect to like and be liked by others. They can be patient and tolerant of others' differences, and can promote the growth of significant others. They don't live in fear of abandonment.

Remember that recovery is a process, not an end state. Recovery is about moving toward these characteristics, abilities, and worldviews. The process is continuous. Nobody does it perfectly.

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