

**Family Dynamics of Addiction and Recovery:
How Can I Tell If My Partner Is
Serious About Recovery?
By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.**

Most spouses of alcoholics or addicts have been down this road before. Something has happened. Some crisis has gotten the attention of the alcoholic/addict and now he is motivated to get clean and sober. This time he is going to AA/NA and going to counseling.

Promises made by the addict to stop the addictive behavior have gone unfulfilled in the past. Yet most of the time, when an addict is making those promises, he intends to keep them. This time is different. They mean it when they say it. That does not mean that what was stated as fact, is indeed, fact.

How can I tell if my partner is really serious about recovery this time? Most addicts have good intentions in recovery, even at the very beginning of recovery. Most addicts believe their own intentions as evidence of being "in recovery". For the family member, however, the "intention" as proof of recovery is not necessarily valid.

The best way to tell how serious someone is about "being in recovery" is to observe their behavior. The newly recovering addict may be saying how much better they feel, how they never want to drink/use again, and talking about their hopes for the future. The newly recovering person often thinks that wanting recovery is equivalent to being in recovery. They often confuse abstinence with recovery. Recovery consists of abstinence from mood altering drugs, and changes in attitudes, feelings, and behavior to such an extent that one's life is appreciably different.

How can I trust my spouse when he says that he is working a program of recovery and not drinking/using drugs? Ask him for a list of specific behavioral changes that he intends to make as indicative of "being in recovery". Ask him "How will I know if you are doing it?" Take the list that they give you and pay attention to their behavior. Ignore the verbiage and observe the behavior.

Behavior is concrete. They did or are doing the behaviors on this list or that are not. It is measurable. Is your spouse's list based on the recommendations of his sponsor, AA group, and/or counselor? Is he doing it consistently?

Behavior is changeable. Today he may be doing more on the list than yesterday. Observe the behavior as proof.

If he says he is going to meetings and you know that when the meetings are being held, he is sitting in front of the television, it tells you something. What kinds of changes do you expect the recovering addict to exhibit? Do you expect a change in the ways that he deals with conflicts? Do you expect changes in the ways that he deals with feelings,

like anger? Do you expect him to have more patience and tolerance with others? Look at your own expectations. Family members often expect the newly recovering person to magically turn into the person they always wanted them to be. Your recovering loved one may have different ideas about the person that they want to be. Or you may be expecting too much, too soon. What kinds of behavioral changes are you seeing? Give them credit for the positive changes that they are making.

Look at your own behavioral changes. The alcoholic/addict is not the only one with "a problem". If you are working on your own recovery, what serious efforts are you making? The spouse who is attending Al-Anon and who intends to focus on his/her own recovery while allowing the addict the dignity of managing his own recovery, has to look to her own behavior. If you are still constantly thinking, ruminating, obsessing on what the alcoholic/addict is doing or not doing, and planning accordingly on what your own response to them should be, are you exhibiting recovery behavior? People serious about recovery, "walk the walk", not just "talk the talk". Change is not that easy. Neither you nor the addict can have recovery without working for it. It is not passive. "Recovery" is a series of active behaviors in a process leading toward health.

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