

**Family Dynamics of Addiction - Family Systems Can
Work For Or Against Your Recovery
By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.**

Alcoholics/addicts do not normally live in a circle made up exclusively of alcoholics and addicts. Most people suffering from addictions have a multitude of people in their lives who are affected by the addiction. Even alcoholics and addicts that are estranged from their significant others, whether spouses or parents, or siblings, of their children, impact the lives of those who love them. When there is addiction in your family, it is vital to get help, even if you are not the addict.

One of the reasons that it is essential for entire household to obtain support and services is the systemic nature of families. In a system, each part affects and is affected by all the parts. Changes in one part (person) of a system affects the whole system in a host of ways.

When teaching about family dynamics of addiction and recovery and explaining how a family system can operate to help or hinder the recovery of the alcoholic/addict, I will use a mobile to illustrate. Imagine if you will, a mobile with two grandparent generation figures on the top, two parents on the second tier, and three children on the third tier, then a dog and cat on the bottom tier. This mobile is hanging from the ceiling. It has a natural equilibrium, or balance, to it.

Now imagine a weight slowly being applied to one of the parent figures (it does not matter which one). As the strain is applied, all figures on the mobile adjust and adjust to accommodate the change in the altered parent. It flops around a bit as the weight is applied. As it settles in, the mobile has adapted a new equilibrium or balance.

Imagine now, that the parent figure with the weight (or addiction) suddenly has the weight removed. All parts of that system will be flopping around trying to re-establish an equilibrium. This is what happens in an addicted family system. Each part of that system affects every other part-even in recovery. As the relatives of an addict change their own behavior to accommodate the addict's changes, each family member tends to develop maladaptive characteristics and traits.

In the course of survival, the essence of relationships between family members changes. The non-addicted spouse often takes on more and more responsibilities and roles within the family. A marriage that was once a relationship between equals may change to one of caretaking or "parenting" the other. Power in the relationship shifts.

As the addiction progresses in the addict, so do the family dynamics of addiction. The course of those changes is predictable. The rules within the system changes as the members eventually reorganize without the addict. The alcoholic/addict may still be physically present, but may become emotionally absent and withdrawn from the family. Significant others often quit trying to re-engage the addict, and begins to carry on with

life without him/her. These behavioral adjustments change the organization and functioning of the system, in the same process that addiction changes the system.

When the alcoholic/addict sobers up, this signals another change in the system. Family members may not know what to do with this change. As the alcoholic/addict tries to regain full functioning in the different areas of their lives, family members who have changed to adjust to the addiction may resist the relationship changes that recovery needs. The "parenting" spouse may resist giving up the need to parent the other spouse. They may oppose the thought of the alcoholic taking back responsibilities abandoned in the addiction or may still perceive the addict as "incompetent" and "untrustworthy". And, indeed, trust is a relationship attribute that takes a long time to return.

The spouse who has taken on more and more of the responsibilities as the addict has abandoned them, may be deeply invested in being "the responsible one", or "the good parent", and may need an "incompetent one" or "the bad parent", to counterbalance their role in the system. Families can resist the recovery changes in the addict in many ways. Spouses (and children) may even say "I liked you better stoned/drank."

Often, loved ones like the alcoholic/addict just the way they are, with exception to the inappropriate, unpredictable behavior and the usual negative consequences of their addiction. They may share the alcoholic/addict's notions that all they need is to lose the addiction and everything else in their lives will be fine. Alcoholics/addicts and their family members may hold on to the notion that they will be able to learn to drink without the natural negative consequences associated with it.

Family systems typically contain more than one alcoholic/addict. In fact, there are usually layers of addiction in families. Frequently, there are two alcoholic spouses. Sometimes the addiction has progressed so much further in one of the spouses that it is more apparent that this spouse has addiction, when the addiction of the other partner is not so obvious. With many addicts in a family, there would be multiple family structures, roles, and rules that would tend to promote the continuing use of alcohol or other drugs. A typical example would be family celebrations that continue to involve alcohol.

On the other hand, family members often have the hidden expectation that a sober alcoholic will turn into the person that the family member always wanted them to be. It is very common that family members have identified many of the addict's undesirable personality characteristics or behavior as "the addiction" and believe that with the absence of the chemical, the addict's true self will emerge. Although many family members see a preview of the wonderful changes in the addict in the honeymoon period of recovery, sustained personality and behavioral changes occur over time.

Thus, the recovering addict is subject to the hidden expectations of his/her family members, regardless of whether the family expect him/her to miraculously be the person they always wanted now that the chemical is absent from their lives, or whether they expect the addict to stay the same, but without the drugs. The recovering addict often has a hard time trying to figure out where they fit in the family, how they feel about other

family members, and how to stay clean and sober amidst conflicting expectations. It is however; always helpful for everyone to remember that each recovering person is responsible for their own recovery.

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