

**Post-Treatment Family Dynamics:
Empower Your Recovery By
Being Responsible to Your Addict**
By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.

Family members generally struggle to figure out the difference between enabling and helping the addict in recovery. One of the best things the family can do is to empower their own recovery by learning the difference between being "responsible for" and being "responsible to" the recovering addict. Family members that have been up close and personal to addiction have a responsibility to the recovering person to learn all that they can about addiction, to fully understand their own contributions to the persistence of the illness, and change their own behavior regarding the addict. To keep from enabling the newly recovery addict to relapse, it is crucial for family members providing support, to outline their expectations regarding the recovery activities of the addict. This encourages the family to be accountable for what happens in their own lives and encourages the addict to be accountable to others for doing all that they can to perpetuate their own continuing recovery.

Family members that support denial, an absence of recovery behavior, or the idea that the addict is "cured" and in no further need of recovery activities are enabling the disease and relapse. Familiarize yourself with the stages of relapse and the process of relapse, so that you can recognize recovery thinking vs. relapse thinking.

A related concept, detachment, is also pertinent here. When you see and hear things that cause concern about relapse, let your recovering significant other know what you see and how you feel about it. Do not take responsibility for fixing it. Much recovery lies in the difference between being "responsible for" and being "responsible to" the recovering addict. When you are taking "responsibility for" you will probably return to old inappropriate caretaking, control, manipulation, and power struggles. When you are being responsible to" your significant other, you are giving him vital information (perhaps that only you have) that he needs for his recovery.

When you take a "responsible to" approach, you are still practicing some detachment. When you detach with love, you are able to take responsibility for your own perceptions and protect your own interests. If your significant other's behavior is telling you that relapse is imminent, don't loan him the car to buy the drugs, go to the bars, or to wreck and get arrested for DUI. If he said he was suicidal, you probably would not hand him a gun. Don't get into an argument about your belief that he is headed for relapse and his belief that he is not. A simple "no" or at most a statement about your lack of comfort with loaning him a car at this time is enough. At this point, you have probably already been responsible to him by telling him what you are observing and your concern about it. To belabor the point is being "responsible for" him.

Spouses and parents should keep in mind that you cannot make them relapse. Consuming alcohol or other drugs is solely the responsibility of the addict. Anything that

the family members do--short of pouring alcohol down their throats, or putting the drug into the body of another person does not "cause" relapse. Sure, you say and do things that angers or hurts the feelings of the addict. Yet, if addicts relapsed every time that they felt hurt or anger, no one would ever achieve any long term sobriety. It is the responsibility of the addict to deal with their feelings and their issues by practicing recovery principles and new living skills acquired by continuously working a program of recovery. Skills are built over time. You can't handle things for them until they acquire some new skills. Your taking responsibilities belonging to them delays learning those skills.

You can help by assisting them in creating an environment conducive to continued recovery. Many people who relapse after inpatient treatment do so in the first thirty days. Some of that has to do with a return or continuation of denial and lack of commitment to recovery, a lack of structure and routine, lack of living skills in general, and lack of follow through with continuing care and 12 step recovery support.

Recovering addicts that come home to a drinking environment, may feel shame about "not being able to drink" and may indicate that they don't care if there is alcohol in the home or if you drink a glass of wine with dinner. They often say that it does not bother them. And it may not bother him until it does. When that happens, the convenient and easy access does not help in interrupting the momentum of the relapse process before the first drink is taken. It seems to me, to be a matter of courtesy and caring to not have alcohol in the home during early recovery of alcoholics/addicts. If it is a problem for family members to not have it in the home, why is that? It may be an appropriate time for other family members to look at their own drinking/using.

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Hubbard House Publishing, Stillwater, Oklahoma