

Addicts: Feeling Like You Have To Keep Them From Using
by Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.

Family members try everything in the book (and write new ones) to keep their addicted family members from using alcohol and other drugs (AOD). Family members feel responsible for taking care of the addict. It is obvious to the family member that the addict is out of control and that his/her drinking/using is the problem. You feel compelled to take control, to try to save them from themselves.

In the process, the addict and the family member(s) engage in a struggle over the chemical. The struggle between the addict and the family member is like a football game. The chemically dependent person is the football player whose focus is on obtaining that football and getting through whatever stands in the way to score that touchdown. Of course the football is the chemical, the family member is standing in the way, and the touchdown is using that chemical.

Just as the family member feels compelled to stop the addict from using, the addict feels compelled to use the chemical. The chemically dependent person is in an obsessive-compulsive relationship with that chemical. The obsession ---“Where can I get it”, “How can I get out of the house so I can use without being the bad guy or hearing about it for days”, “Isn’t it ever going to be 5:00 o-clock?”--- is in the foreground of the alcoholic/addict's mind. The compulsion is about being compelled or driven to enact the behavior.

Family members eventually figure out that they can't physically stop the addict from drinking/using when they are ready to use. So the game moves up a couple of notches where the addict and family member engage in a chess match where family members try to figure out several steps ahead of the addict, what their opponent is going to do next, so that they can have a carefully prepared counter move and cut them off at the pass. No matter how far ahead you try to intercept and redirect the behavior before it happens, you cannot win. You are playing with Bobby Fischer, and your addict is way ahead of you, probably without knowing it.

Alcoholics/addicts are out of control. Family members feel compelled to take control. The alcoholic may not know that he/she is out of control. Family members know. Family members feel controlled by the actions of the alcoholic. The alcoholic feels controlled by the family member. In the struggle for control, each feels angry and misunderstood. While you think you are helping the addict, when you are locked into that struggle over control with the addict, you are actually enabling the addict. By engaging in the struggle over control, the family member enables the addict to identify the family member and their controlling behavior as the problem. The struggle between the two of them is seen as the struggle, which reinforces denial and helps the addict avoid seeing their own struggle with addiction as the struggle.

You cannot keep them from using. You did not cause the problem. You cannot control it. You cannot cure it. If you can allow the addict to suffer the natural negative consequences of their using, they may become motivated to change.

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