

**Really Good Reasons You Need To Be Involved in Your Family Member's
Addiction Treatment
By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.**

Why should family members be involved in the treatment process of their alcoholic/addicted family member? Let me count the ways. The benefits of family treatment could go on and on, but here are eight good reasons.

1. You learn that you are not alone. Family dynamics of addiction and recovery are pretty predictable. As the disease progresses for the addict, they, as well as their kin become more and more isolated. Shame also isolates and keeps hurting band of survivors silent about the disease. Spouses and parents may also have a compulsion to keep the secret in order to protect the addict from consequences that could affect the whole clan (i.e., financially, career, legal, etc.). Because the dynamics of addiction are played out in silence and isolation, each person feels that they alone, have experienced the shame, guilt, hurt, sadness, loneliness, compulsion to take control and doubt about their own sanity, that comes with addiction.

2. You have an opportunity to recover from your own pain. No one escapes from an alcoholic system unscathed. It does not happen. Any close collection of people that that has an addicted member has pain. While the relatives of the addict are focused on the afflicted's pain and survival, they tend to ignore, down-play, or minimize their own pain. They are often oblivious to the negative effects on their own lives. They are negatively affected not only by the behavior of the addict, but by their own attempts to cope and problem solve.

3. You have an opportunity to make decisions based on strength rather than fear and desperation. The chaotic environment of the alcoholic home creates an acute stress reaction in all residents of the home. Each household member tends to get stuck in "survival mode". Decision making often occurs in the context of identifying the least damaging or the least scary options. Relatives often see themselves between the hard place and the rock, with no attractive alternatives. In treatment, spouses and parents are able to identify alternatives previously not considered and to begin to make choices based on knowledge rather than emotion.

4. You get to find yourself again. Spouses often complain that they have lost themselves in the process of their significant other's addiction. They find that they have become people that they not only never intended to be, but have become people that they do not like. They often come to realize that they have acted outside their own value system, by lying, manipulating, and shaming the addict to get them to change. In treatment, these spouses have an opportunity to learn new ways to communicate and problem solve with their addicted significant others.

5. You get to learn what is and is not your responsibility. In the treatment process, you get to learn how to let go of that which is not yours to do. You have an opportunity to learn to be assertive and choose your own activities. You become empowered to take

responsibility for your own behavior while allowing others the dignity to be responsible for their behavior. Spouses often come to identify that they have been compelled to "parent" their addicted spouse during active addiction. One of the most freeing aspects of family treatment is learning how to let of that.

6. You get to learn about alcoholism and other drug addictions. Most people buy into some antiquated ideas, myths, and stereotypes about alcoholics and addicts. Treatment dispels those myths. When family members go to "Family Week", they get to meet folks from all walks of life-brilliant, creative, charming people who are captains of industry, lawyers, doctors, mechanics, artists, housepainters, entrepreneurs-who happen to also be alcoholics/addicts. Addiction is no respecter of person or position. Old notions of who is and who isn't alcoholic/addicted will be challenged. Incorrect information that you may have learned from your family of origin (or others) about addiction being a "choice", a "character problem", or a "moral dilemma" will be replaced with factual data from the current knowledge base. You will have an opportunity to learn about the family dynamics of addiction and recovery so that you will know some of what to expect in early recovery. You will come to know and accept that your loved one's addiction is not your fault and that you cannot make them relapse. Principles of cross-addiction, a very important concept for continuing recovery is reviewed. You should also leave treatment armed with knowledge about the symptoms and process of relapse. This is crucial information to have.

7. You will learn a new language. Significant others entering a treatment program for "Family Week" often remark that there seems to be a common language being spoken in treatment, and that they feel like the "uninitiated". A common recovery language is helpful for the addict and the family, so that they can better understand each other. Otherwise, family members often feel left behind, or like they are on the "outside, looking in".

8. You will also have an opportunity to learn about principles of family dynamics and qualities of family systems that operate to work against continuing recovery. You will come to understand how system processes and characteristics that evolve over time to incorporate the illness into the balance and functioning of that system, also operate to keep things the same in recovery. If only one person in the system gets help, it can be difficult for the recovering person to maintain their positive changes in the midst of the old family rules, roles, and established patterns.

Not only is participation of significant others in addiction rehab important for the recovery of the addict and the family members, most family members leave the treatment center feeling blessed that they had an opportunity to experience the learning and healing process afforded them.

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