

Communication in Addiction Recovery – Twelve Guidelines For Family Feelings Meetings

By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.

Families just don't know what to do with themselves when the designated alcoholic or addict gets sober. The first year of recovery is a time of confusion, joy, fear, anger, sadness, happiness-in short a full range of emotion. Most families don't what know to expect in that first year. They know the addict has gotten sober and that something has changed in the system. They know, too, that they are expected to change. But they may not be sure how they are supposed to be changing and what they are supposed to be doing differently.

Before treatment and recovery, there were "Don't Trust, Don't Talk, Don't Feel" rules. Now, it seems that they are being encouraged by everyone to talk about feelings. Spouses may not trust the recovering alcoholic/addict with their feelings. They may be concerned that their feelings will be used against them. They may expect old behavior from the addict. Children will also have "trust issues", but they may not have even learned how to identify their feelings. They may have experienced the other parent making excuses for the addict when they tried to say how they felt about the drunken parent's behavior. They may also be fearful of the reactions to their feelings by one or both parents.

For the addict in recovery, there is a new awareness that alcoholics and addicts used their drugs of choice to not experience their feelings or to not have to deal with them. Addicts (and their family members) learn that dealing with feelings appropriately is a necessary coping skill for ongoing sobriety. They are taught that feelings should be dealt with in an open, honest manner, and that recovering people should take risks by telling others how they feel. They are taught some basic communication skills in their counseling experiences and advised to "practice, practice, practice."

One of the most helpful tools to gain skill at identifying, owning, expressing, and working through feelings is to have routine Family Feelings Meetings. They are a great tool for continuing the development of positive communication skills within the family and eliminating old, counter-therapeutic conflict-oriented techniques. Feelings Meetings for Couples use the same guidelines. These daily sharing meetings are recommended for couples, for about 15 minutes every day at the same time daily. Family feelings sharing times (with the whole nuclear family) could be held weekly, again at the same time during the week. The amount of time you spend in this communication skills building get-together will have to be worked out according to size of family and age of kids. If you make a time "sacred" (same time, same place, each day/week) for your feelings meetings, you are more likely to follow through with it. The more you practice, the better you get.

Here are the guidelines for a Family Feelings Meeting:

1. In Feelings Meetings, every one is equal. Everyone gets to share.
2. Each person's feelings are just as important as the others' feelings. All feelings are allowable.
3. Appropriate expression of negative feelings may need guidance.
4. Have structure; get a gavel and make it semi-formal to generate interest with the kids.
5. Allow children to take turns leading the meeting as soon as maturity level permits. Let the kids call the meeting to order and call on family members to share feelings.
6. Let the kids have their feelings. Try not to "kiss it and make it better". Validate their feelings by relating a time you felt that way or that you can see why they would feel that way.
7. Don't use feelings meetings as a problem solving session. Set a separate time for "executive sessions" to work through problems using fair fight tactics.
8. Accept others' feelings. Don't try to take them away or fix them. That's not your job.
9. Use lots of "I" messages and avoid "You" messages.
10. Talk only about yourself.

11. Practice active listening techniques. That means feeding back what you heard (i.e, "What I hear you saying is...")
11. Use these Feelings words--fear, anger, shame, guilt, hurt, sad, lonely, helpless, joy.
12. "I feel as if...", "I feel that...." are not feelings statements. They are "thinking statements".

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