

Addiction is a Family Disease

By Terry Allen



Something particularly insidious

about chemical dependency is that it is really a family disease, affecting the active alcoholic or addict as well as family members. The environment of an addictive home creates its own dysfunctional family system that is centered on fear, shame and denial, with elaborate systems to accommodate or cover up addictive behavior.

We find that treating individuals in primary care also should include treating and supporting family and loved ones, and addressing the family dynamic.

When their loved one finally receives treatment, often family members are also in significant need of support and counseling. They may have developed medical problems as a result of chronic stress and self-neglect. They may be developing substance abuse issues themselves.

Dysfunctional family systems work in a kind of chaotic atmosphere that is built to support the addict's chemical dependency. But when the individual is in recovery, a healthier family system must be developed for successful recovery for everyone involved. Family members may be unaware of how the disease has negatively affected their lives, and don't know what to expect, or how to support their loved one's recovery.


Co-dependent behavior is a learned set of coping skills to deal with an addict, robbing a person of a sense of

self. Recovering from co-dependency is a journey worth taking, and can be supported by such AA groups as Al-Anon. Many people have learned how to form healthy relationships, with respect and boundaries, through participation in such groups.

Addressing the family dynamic is also a central element in our community prevention programs, from early childhood to older adult. Children who learn healthy coping skills and behaviors, and non-alcohol or drug-related recreational activities have more "protector" factors against addiction. Middle school aged children are peer-influenced and often make unhealthy choices inspired by glamorous media images, older kids, or family members' behavior as well. When peer-led activities demonstrate healthy alternatives, paired with education, we've seen the group's use of alcohol and tobacco drop significantly.

Older adult alcoholics are often isolated from their families, by distance or because their adult children find them difficult to deal with. Education about the disease of addiction, and how it can tear families apart is important for prevention and recovery for individuals, families and the greater community. Many adult children just can't believe that Grandma has a drinking problem, but we know that one third of all older adult alcoholics are late-onset addicts. The family may excuse the alcohol abuse; after all, "She's retired, let her do what she wants." The spouse may also resist the idea of treatment because the relationship must then change.

Addiction is a cruel disease, stripping families of emotional, financial and medical health. Building resilience

in children and preventing late onset addiction are possible. Recovery for families and individuals is possible and must be supported with education, treatment, continuing care services and recovery groups like AA. 

—Terry Allen is the CEO of Hanley Center. West Palm Beach, Florida, a premiere nonprofit treatment center for chemical dependency that specializes in age and gender-specific treatment, based on the Twelve Step philosophy. Hanley Center is nationally known for its pioneering work with older adults. With the idea that "Help becomes Hope," the expansion of Hanley Center includes community facilities for prevention and education, an expansive recovery bookstore, Family Program and Children's Learning Place, and a 200-seat auditorium. All treatment programs and a range of therapeutic areas will also be expanded, including the Centers of Women's, Older Adult and Men's Recovery, Wellness Center, and Spiritual Care. For more information: www.hanleycenter.org, or call (561) 841-1000, or (800)-444-7008.



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