



The Addictive Process for Families, Friends and Colleagues

Introduction

This article is aimed at helping relatives and others in a close relationship with a patient currently being treated at Nova Vida Recovery Centre and for those who have a close relationship with someone who is abusing or dependant on alcohol or drugs.

Addiction is a complex issue. It is often seen as a moral failing and evidence of a weak character, lacking self control. It affects every member of the family and reaches as far as friends, neighbours and work colleagues and can have a lasting impact on their lives. It is a process rather than an event and in the beginning people often do not experience any lasting difficulties. As their use continues they may begin to focus more on the alcohol or drugs than they do on the other areas of their lives. This process is often influenced by a number of factors which includes the environment they live in, life events, their genetic make-up and their relationships with family and friends.

When a family member has a dependency, the whole family, friends, neighbours and colleagues usually develop ways of coping with the problems associated with the dependency. Often, there is less communication as the family avoids talking about the issue, avoids expressing emotions and may try to keep the addiction secret from the community in which they live. Family members may take on some of the responsibilities abandoned by the addicted person.

While coping strategies may help the family to operate more smoothly and get along better, they may also allow the dependency to continue. Unfortunately, family members may also use alcohol, or drugs themselves as a way of coping with the problems in the family.

Families with an addicted member often experience anger, shame, loneliness, frustration and fear. They feel hopeless about the situation but it is important for them to realise that the addiction is not their fault. Seeking outside help from a support group or professional counsellor can assist them to cope with what is going on in their family.

The family as a protective shell

For too long addiction had been an issue that has been ignored or swept under the carpet. Ignorance, fear and embarrassment still surround the problem today and Society is confused about how to cope with it.

As well as being a great master of disguise, the main symptom of addiction is denial. Those that suffer from it are usually the last to recognise it. As a result, families are often in great despair and feel helpless as they watch the health and behaviour of a loved one, deteriorate. It is difficult to understand why a successful businessman secretly hides his bottle of alcohol or another person steals from the family to pay for the compulsive need for heroin or cocaine.

In families where addiction prevails, the alcoholic or drug user usually assumes the centre stage. Relatives, friends and colleagues tip-toe around them, gauging their mood, deciding whether to approach them to discuss their drinking/using or whether it is the right time to include them in family or work decisions. Often partners, parents and children do not want to “rock the boat” in fear that if the addicted persons are upset that will trigger the drinking or using again.

The family become very stuck in worrying about the addict and because everyone cares, they are usually desperate to find a solution to the problem. The major preoccupation becomes - how are they going to fix the problem? What actually happens is that the family tries to avoid causing any upset by taking responsibility for the addict's life, behaviour or feelings. As a result, because of the denial of the illness combined with the “pussy-footing” of the family, the addict is unable to see clearly the extent of the problem.

Family members may often need help first in order to assist addicted people to face reality. There is still a belief that the illness of addiction should be allowed to progress until the individual acknowledges that they need help and reach their ‘rock bottom’. This delay is not only unnecessary but potentially dangerous and some dependent people die before help reaches them. The destructive process can be interrupted successfully. Frequently this happens when the family learns to take less responsibility for the addict and to ‘detach with love’, letting the addict accept the consequences of their addictive behaviour.

Families looking at themselves

Families living with addiction are often under great emotional stress. Usually, they have coped with living in chaos and trauma over a large number of years and more often than not, they have channeled great energy and love into trying to help the addicted person. Some of that pain occurs as the family's battle to control the addict's behaviour begins to govern their lifestyle. As relatives struggle to cope they can become set in a destructive pattern of recurring and damaging situations. Concerned persons can become as dependent on the addict in much the same way as they (the addict) are on alcohol and drugs.

As the addict becomes more preoccupied in their addiction, the family puts more time and effort into fixing the situation. Coping becomes the central part of their lives. They anticipate the drinking/drug use, make allowances for it while it is happening and adjust to absorb the harmful consequences as each cycle draws to an end. In their hearts, they know they cannot change the addict. Yet, a similar denial system to that of the addicted person tells them they can or should rectify the situation. The family are also caught up in the spiral of addiction and suffers as the pattern keeps repeating itself. They become caretakers for the addict and enable the addiction to progress: the exact opposite of what they are trying to achieve.

Family members assume different roles as they try to sort out the addict. Some ‘act tough’ hoping that they can bully the addicted person into some kind of reasonable behaviour. Others drink or use in an attitude of ‘if you can't beat them join them’. Sometimes the belief is that if a relative accompanies the addict in using or drinking then the addict is likely to drink smaller amounts. The implicit assumption of each of these roles is that the concerned persons can somehow change the addict and they have established themselves as being responsible for that person. The message that the addicted person receives is that there is no need to change because different family members are signalling that they will take responsibility for the compulsive behaviour. This message encourages the addict to resist change.

Usually, the family is not consciously aware of this pattern and when it is suggested that they are partners in addiction, it can be somewhat shocking to them. If individual members are willing to change their care taking behaviour and 'detach with love' from the addict, then they are given a clearer opportunity to choose recovery. Unfortunately, the addict may not accept this opportunity and move on to find a new caretaker who will repeat the pattern of dependent relationships.

The important point is that in interrupting the destructive cycle, concerned persons can give up the roles they play in an unhealthy family system and begin their own emotional growth. Some are willing to take the risk and face the uncertainty that results in letting go. This does involve coming to terms with that fact that no-one can change another person and accepting that continuing the protective, care taking role will not result in any healthy change within the family.

Families learning to "let go"

It is not easy learning to 'let go'. Some adapt to it much more easily than others. We believe that the whole family needs and deserves support, this includes the children. Frequently, adults assume that the very young have been protected from the reality of addiction. In our experience, children are the most aware of what is happening in the home. They need a great deal of understanding and support as they are often disregarded/unheard because the assumption is that they do not know there is a problem.

The Team at Nova Vida have developed a Family Programme to provide support for all those involved in a close relationship with addicts. This help includes:

Family Intervention

Families and friends often recognise that there is a problem with addiction long before the sufferer does. There can be a long period of frustration, as the family tries in vain to make the addicted person change. Family counselling can be arranged when advice is given on the nature of the illness, how to obtain treatment for the addicted person and how the family can help themselves. We have produced a leaflet 'Tough Love – The Importance of Intervention' which is available free of charge for those who feel this may be the way forward.

Family Programme

The family and friends of all our patients are strongly encouraged to become involved in our Family Programme. This is educational in that many aspects of the disease and treatment of addiction are discussed. The meetings also give the family the opportunity to share their experiences of living with the stress and gradual disintegration of their lives and understand they are no longer alone. The Family Programme is arranged to give families, friends and work colleagues time and space for themselves; time to learn how to detach and let the addicted person be responsible for themselves.

Family Conferences

Whilst a patient is participating in the treatment programme, the family is involved as much as possible. Meetings with the patient's counsellor are arranged to discuss such issues as the effect of addiction on the family, relationship problems and adjustment to recovery. These meetings can be arranged to coincide with participation in the Family Programme.