



Recovering Families

When someone in the family has a chemical dependency, everyone changes under the strain. As the chemically dependent family member begins to recover, the rest of the family also needs to recover. To help the dependent person stay sober, family members need to develop patience, reasonable expectations and better communication skills.

When Will Everything Be OK?

Life with a chemically dependent parent, spouse or child can be difficult. People often feel hurt and angry about the hard times, blaming it all on the chemically dependent person or the drug itself. They may think that all the problems would go away if the dependent person would just stay off drugs. But getting sober is only the start of recovery. In order to have a healthy and happy family, everyone has to work at it.

There are no magic steps to recovery. The recovering person needs to concentrate on permanently changing his or her behavior. This is not an easy task, and the whole family has to know it. Otherwise, they're likely to hope for too much, and be angry and disappointed when their hopes aren't met. On the other hand, it helps everyone if each family member learns to appreciate the small, day-to-day changes.

Having someone outside the family to talk to can also help, since anger and disappointment tend to grow if they're locked inside. Seek help from counselors who deal with chemical dependencies, or from 12-step programs such as Al-Anon. Besides talking about your feelings at 12-step meetings, you'll have a chance to laugh, enjoy yourself and make friends with people who really understand.

Improving Family Communication

More than anything else, most recovering families need to improve the ways they communicate with each other. Here are some suggestions:

- ◆ Whenever possible, start your sentences with "I" instead of "you." For example, say, "I feel hurt about that," instead of "You're always so mean." Be as honest as you can about your feelings without blaming.
- ◆ Don't talk to one family member about how another member is behaving. Instead, talk to the person whose behavior you don't like.
- ◆ Avoid asking questions that start with "why." The answers don't usually help and often distract you from the real issues.
- ◆ Practice listening to each other, and try to see each other's points of view. Try asking if you've understood correctly, by repeating what you think the other person has said, using slightly different words.
- ◆ Take time to be with just your spouse in low-key, pleasant surroundings on a regular basis. Make sure you won't be interrupted, and don't use the time for TV or sex. Instead, use it as a chance to get to know each other again, bit by bit, and share the good parts of your recovery with each other.
- ◆ Have family meetings to plan good times together. Make sure everyone gets a chance to speak and no one gets interrupted or put down. Meetings can also be used to negotiate chores and privileges or practice solving problems together.

You might all write out a "family contract" over several meetings about responsibilities, privileges and consequences of not taking responsibility. An agreed-on contract, signed by everyone and updated about every six months, can really help to keep the family peace by making sure that everyone knows what's expected and gets rewarded for doing their part.

Resources

For more help with your family's recovery, ask your employee assistance program for suggestions.