**HOW ADDICTION AFFECTS THE FAMILY**

Addiction affects the family in many ways, including emotionally, financially, legally, and medically. For this reason, many treatment professionals stress healing the entire family unit.

The Many Ways Addiction Affects the Family

Battling a substance use disorder (SUD) is viewed by many as a personal experience. Because harmful substances have devastating effects on the user, many may not take into consideration the other people involved. Spouses, children, and parents may all be impacted by the way addiction affects the family.

The effects of drug and alcohol addiction can be both short-term and long-term. Peaceful, loving homes can be divided by the strain caused by drug and alcohol abuse. Conflict becomes normal as family members fight to engage with a child who abuses Heroin, for example. Trust begins to erode. Relatives may become more guarded if a relative abusing illicit substances acts with aggression or hide their disorder in secrecy. Marriages can end due to changes caused by addiction. Communication becomes more difficult, highlighting frustration.

Family members may see their relatives endure the side effects of drugs or fly into rages when under the influence of alcohol. Others may see their relatives lose weight rapidly, becoming unrecognizable. Some may not hear from a loved one for an extended period of time, only to discover that they are living on the street or have fatally overdosed. Such shocks can cause a relative to endure severe trauma or develop unhealthy coping mechanisms like codependent behaviors in response.

***The Effects of Addiction on a Family***

Just like addiction causes a variety of effects on the person using substances, it leads to another set of impact on the family. The exact outcomes depend on things like which family member struggles with addiction, the age of the children, or whether children live with their parents. Not all families experience the same effects, but oftentimes they are at least somewhat similar.

**Financial Hardship**

It isn’t cheap to support an active drug habit. Many addicts funnel all their money toward getting the substances they need. They may have a hard time keeping a job, so they ask for money, food, shelter, or other forms of support. Some might ask for help paying for a treatment facility or other program.

Families tend to take on financial responsibility for an addicted family member. Parents allow children to live with them while trying to get “back on their feet.” They pay for lawyers or post bail if legal troubles start. They’re all too familiar with the balance of how to help an addict without enabling them.

**Increased Risk of Abuse**

As addiction progresses, people become unpredictable and difficult to deal with. They are erratic, frustrated, and angry, lashing out at those closest to them. Drugs and alcohol affect an individual’s inhibitions. People are more likely to act out while under the influence.

One of the most profound ways addiction affects the entire family is the higher risk of abuse. Whether it’s emotional, physical, or sexual abuse, the risk increases. There is a higher likelihood that family members may experience violence at the hands of an addict.

**More Addiction in the Family**

Another impact of addiction on the family unit is the chance that another family member will also turn to substances. Children who grow up with a family member that abuses drugs are more likely to turn to substances. They follow the example set for them. Siblings might use substances to escape the chaos in their house.

Often, substance abuse “runs” in families. The chances of having more than one person in a family with a problem are high. This creates another pattern of addiction, and the cycle starts all over again.

**Broken Families**

The effects of addiction tear families apart. A person who struggles with addiction usually pushes their family members to their limits. This leads to severed ties and broken families. Some people can only take so much before they decide to cut their loved one from their life, so long as they’re in active addiction.

Some use to the point that their spouse or the state declare them incapable of caring for their children. Children who lose a parent or parents to drugs are left with feelings of abandonment and betrayal that may cause them to write their parents off for months, years, or even decades.

**How Addiction Impacts Young Children**

According to Psychology Today, 1 in 5 children grows up in a home where a parent abuses drugs or alcohol. Witnessing the trauma of a parent suffering from addiction at a young age has long-term effects on the child. Children who grow up seeing a parent addicted to drugs or alcohol are more likely to develop SUDs in their adulthood. They are also 3 times more likely to be neglected or physically and/or sexually abused. Seeing a parent on drugs often invokes distressing emotions which not only create delays in learning and development but can also lead to pronged mental and emotional disorders.

Since children are still developing their personalities and are vulnerable to external influences, they run the risk of repeating such behaviors. Children may be exposed to aggression or violent behavior due to a parent’s drinking. Arguments between parents may be normal, causing the child emotional distress as they witness family members fighting.

Early exposure to a home divided by drug use can cause a child to feel emotionally and physically neglected and unsafe. As a result, they can become more mentally and emotionally unstable. Children may develop extreme guilt and self-blame for a parent’s substance abuse. They may develop feelings of unworthiness or develop dysfunctional attachments in their adulthood. In extreme cases, children can be removed from the home and placed in foster care.

**The Six Family Roles in Addiction**

When a person struggles with addiction, each family member develops their way of handling the problem. Clinicians notice five distinct roles that family members may take on to cope with their loved one’s substance use. Some families have a person for each role, others have members who adopt multiple roles, and others may not have certain roles in their family.

The six family roles in addiction are a simple way to observe how family members of addicts deal with their loved ones. None of these roles are healthy ways of working through the difficulty, but each makes sense given the circumstances and effects of addiction.

**The Addict**

The addict is the person with the substance abuse problem and the focal point of the family. They are the source of most of the conflict in the home, whether directly or indirectly. Addicts tend to act and behave in whatever ways suit them, regardless of the effects on their family members. They may not realize how much the family dynamic centers around them.

**The Caretaker/enabler**

The caretaker is the family member who makes excuses or covers for the addict and the problems they create. They take on many household responsibilities to “keep the peace” and do their best to make sure the family is as happy as possible. The caretaker finds their purpose in enabling the addict, which keeps the entire cycle in motion. Caretakers are also martyrs of the family because they sacrifice themselves for what seems like the good of the family.

**The Hero**

The hero is similar to the caretaker but doesn’t participate in enabling the addict. Instead, they do everything they can to ensure the family appears normal. They try to maintain stability behind closed doors and maintain appearances outside the home. Heroes tend to be the “golden child”: highly responsible, self-sufficient, and perfectionist. However, their golden exterior merely covers up the increasing pain they feel inside.

**The Scapegoat**

The scapegoat is the opposite of the hero, the “problem child”. They tend to be defiant and are filled with hostility toward the rest of the family. Instead of compensating for the chaos in the home, they try to draw attention to themselves through harmful behaviors. This diverts attention away from the addict in another way but still keeps the cycle in motion.

**The Mascot**

The mascot is the funny guy in the family. They try to alleviate the chaos and stress by diverting attention through humor or silly behavior. Mascots always tend to be in motion, constantly trying to make other family members feel better with their antics. This exhausting role keeps the mascot from having to look at the reality of their family dynamic, regardless of its impact.

**The Lost Child**

The lost child is the quiet one in the family. They do their best to stay out of the way and avoid creating any additional difficulty. The lost child watches as the chaos plays out among their family members and does what they can to blend into the background. Lost children tend to be younger or middle children, already used to their older siblings taking the lead. They all but disappear amidst the tumultuous environment in their home.