



The Power of Family in Addiction Recovery

NOMA
RECOVERY

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A large body of research demonstrates the positive impact the family can have on a loved one's recovery from addiction. The National Institute on Drug Abuse highlights the many benefits of family involvement in recovery, including:¹

- Keeping your loved one engaged and motivated during treatment
- Learning about addiction and its effects on the family as well as understanding how treatment works and what to expect when it's complete
- Enabling family members to voice feelings and concerns and ask questions about a loved one's addiction
- Offering a loved one a high level of appropriate support after treatment
- Easing feelings of fear, anger, stress and confusion related to the addiction
- The chance for family members to develop skills and strategies to help a loved one stay on the path to recovery
- Improvements in family communication skills
- The opportunity to address any mental health issues within the family system, such as depression or anxiety, which can hamper family communication and contribute to relapse

Getting involved in a loved one's recovery improves the chances of long-term success while improving household function and family members' own mental health. Here, we look at how addiction affects the family system, what involvement in treatment and post-treatment recovery looks like, and how you can best support a loved one in the recovery process.



Addiction is a Family Disease

The National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence calls addiction a family disease.² That's because addiction affects the entire family system and the individuals who comprise it. Addiction puts family members under a great deal of stress, disrupting routines and causing unsettling or even frightening experiences.

As a result, family members develop unhealthy coping strategies as they strive to maintain equilibrium in the household. The family unit becomes a fragile and dysfunctional system, and this often unwittingly contributes to the addiction as the family adopts destructive behaviors as a result of it.

Children in the household are particularly affected by addiction. Substance abuse in the home interrupts a child's normal development and leads to a higher risk for physical, mental and emotional health problems.³ Children of an addicted parent often have difficulties in school and are more likely than their peers to have a learning disability, skip school or be expelled. They're also four times more likely than their counterparts to become addicted to alcohol or drugs themselves.



The Family System: Unhealthy Behaviors



Families often cope with addiction in unhealthy ways, such as by living in denial about the addiction or by following behind their loved one, picking up pieces. Their lives may revolve around the addiction, whether it's at the root of endless arguments or it's an elephant in the room.

Codependent and enabling behaviors are common among families living with addiction. These types of behaviors can foster the addiction as well as make recovery very difficult for both the addicted loved one and the family members.

Codependency

Codependency often results when someone has to adapt to dysfunction in the family system.⁴ Codependent behaviors are learned thoughts, attitudes and behaviors that lead to neglecting your own needs and desires in favor of being obsessively concerned with a loved one's problems.

Codependent behaviors include:

- Worrying constantly about your loved one's drug abuse and the consequences of the addiction
- Living in denial about the addiction, such as by lying to others about a loved one's substance abuse or avoiding contact with others because you don't want to have to make excuses
- Reacting violently or irrationally to events related to the addiction
- Having very low self-esteem as a result of neglecting your own physical, spiritual and emotional needs as you focus solely on your loved one
- Aiming misplaced anger at others, such as the kids or pets
- Engaging in your own unhealthy behaviors that help you cope with reality, such as over-eating, excessive shopping or obsessive Internet use
- Basing your mood on that of your loved one

Enabling

Enabling behaviors support a loved one's substance abuse by removing consequences, either out of love or fear. This makes it easy for a loved one to keep using, and it's unhealthy for the enabler, the addicted individual and the family system.

Enabling behaviors include:

- Using drugs or alcohol with a loved one to help keep trouble at bay
- Keeping your feelings inside in order to keep the peace with your loved one
- Accepting your loved one's justifications for substance abuse
- Working to protect your loved one's image by minimizing the consequences of the addiction, such as by making excuses for them or taking care of their responsibilities
- Going out of your way to make everything at home appear normal to others
- Feeling guilty when you're unable to prevent natural consequences from affecting your addicted loved one



How Children May Cope

Children may develop their own set of unhealthy coping skills in response to addiction in the household and the chaos and uncertainty it inevitably brings. Many children blame themselves for a parent's substance abuse and may strive for perfection to avoid upsetting the delicate balance in the household. Conversely, they may withdraw for the same reason.

Children who witness or fall victim to physical, emotional or sexual abuse may develop post-traumatic stress disorder and suffer from related nightmares, insomnia and flashbacks. They may withdraw socially due to a lack of social skills or the fear that someone may find out the truth, and they may suffer from anxiety born from an unstable living environment or from a deep-seated fear of losing their parent to the addiction.



Four Ways to Get Involved in a Loved One's Treatment

Because addiction is a family disease, the whole family is in recovery when a loved one seeks help for an addiction. Family involvement in the recovery process is crucial for the best possible chance of successful long-term sobriety, because dysfunction in the household is a major relapse trigger. The more the family can do to restore function to the family system and heal individually, the better the chances of beating the addiction.

Family Therapy

Family therapy is a fundamental part of a high-quality treatment program. Family therapy addresses dysfunction in the family system and helps family members understand the interdependent nature of that system and work to replace unhealthy thoughts, attitudes and behaviors with healthier ones.⁵ Productive change comes about through improving communication skills, exploring relationship patterns among family members and working to restore trust and rebuild damaged relationships.

Family behavior therapy is an outpatient treatment that's been shown to reduce drug and alcohol use in both adults and adolescents, and it improves family functioning by addressing a variety of issues. Co-occurring problems like depression, unemployment, conduct disorders and child mistreatment must be managed in order to restore optimal family functioning.⁶



Individual Therapy

Although individual therapy for family members is not generally part of a treatment program, each family member—and the family system—will benefit from individual therapy, which helps members identify unhealthy patterns of thought and behavior and replace them with healthier ways of thinking and behaving.

As family members address their own complex issues related and unrelated to the addiction, they develop skills and strategies aimed at restoring good mental health and an improved sense of well-being. Family members improve their self-esteem and communication skills and develop skills and strategies for improving the functioning of the family system. For children and adolescents, individual therapy reduces the risk of developing a substance use disorder down the road.

Psychoeducational Classes or Workshops

Another staple in a high-quality treatment program, psychoeducational workshops for family members can make a big difference in an individual's recovery. Psychoeducational workshops serve to educate family members about addiction and how it affects brain function, behavior and the family system. Family members learn about the recovery process and the stages and signs of relapse.

Classes and workshops offer tips for families on how to best support their loved one in recovery through both good times and setbacks, as well as help family members understand:

- How 12-step support groups work and their importance in ongoing recovery
- How to build a support system
- How to develop healthy coping skills
- The difference between enabling behaviors and those that support recovery
- The importance of setting boundaries
- The importance of healthy communication



Support Groups

Support groups are important for family members, especially during the early period of addiction recovery.⁷ Support groups prevent feelings of isolation and offer the opportunity for family members to tell their story, vent their feelings and receive support from people who have gone through a similar situation. They offer a safe place to voice fears, work through setbacks and celebrate milestones, and they provide the therapeutic benefit of being able to help someone else through a rough patch.



When a Family Member
Doesn't Want to Be Involved



In some cases, for various reasons, a family member may choose not to be involved in the recovery process. Fear is often at the heart of this reluctance.⁸ Some may worry that they'll be ganged up on in therapy or that they'll have to confront difficult issues that they'd rather not face. Others may be afraid of revealing family secrets like abuse or illegal activities, or they may have an inherent distrust of large systems and agencies.

While it can be very difficult to get reluctant family members involved in treatment, psychoeducational workshops and motivational interviewing are two interventions that can help weaken resistance.⁹

Psychoeducational workshops impart the importance and far-reaching benefits of family involvement in recovery. Motivational interviewing can help a family member work through ambivalence toward recovery and help them identify their own motivation for change.



Four Major Factors that Promote a Life of Recovery

Once treatment is complete, an aftercare plan is developed and set in place to help prevent relapse. The aftercare plan will include components based on individual need to continue addressing the issues underlying the addiction and provide a high level of support in early recovery. While the aftercare plan doesn't involve the family—aside from ongoing family therapy that may be part of the plan—continuing to engage in individual therapy and a support group is crucial during this pivotal time.

Recovery is a process of change, according to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.¹⁰ People in recovery work to reach their full potential to live a self-directed life while improving their physical and mental health and sense of well-being. Four major factors promote a life in recovery: health, home, purpose and community. Understanding how these factors affect recovery can help make supporting a loved one easier.

Health. Good health in recovery helps to stave off relapse. Taking care of your health includes managing stress, getting plenty of exercise and eating a healthy diet, all of which promote feelings of strength and well-being and improve the chances of successful long-term recovery.

Making healthy lifestyle changes as a family promotes good health all around and can help prevent relapse. Time that used to be spent under the influence or recovering from using can be used for enjoyable family activities that help promote harmony in the household as well as foster good physical and mental health.

Home. A safe, stable place to live is crucial for successful recovery. Striving for a functional household is made easier with family and individual therapy, both of which support meaningful change and help family members improve their listening and communication skills.

Purpose. Much of treatment is devoted to helping individuals find purpose and meaning in life, an essential component of successful recovery. Feelings of boredom and isolation as well as a lack of purpose in life can lead back to using drugs or alcohol to fill a void. A sense of purpose comes from personal fulfillment, and finding ways to participate in society and achieve independence are cornerstones of recovery.

Employment, volunteering, attending school and developing healthy hobbies are some ways to achieve fulfillment and find meaning in life. Families can work together to find purposeful activities that promote a sense of worth and belonging, such as by enjoying quality time together, volunteering as a family, engaging in creative endeavors and supporting a recovering loved one in finding fulfillment without drugs or alcohol.



Community. The importance of the web of relationships and social networks that provide love, hope and support to someone in recovery can't be overstated. A solid community of support is crucial to successful recovery, and healthy relationships are the foundation of this community. Letting go of unhealthy relationships, working through family issues and developing new relationships with supportive people who respect the decision to abstain from drugs and alcohol are important ways to promote successful recovery.



Relapse is Possible

Recovery is all about relapse prevention. Health, home, purpose and community are the cornerstones of a life in recovery, but it's important to understand that setbacks—which are any behaviors that can lead to relapse—are a normal part of recovery. Relapse rates for addiction are similar to those for other chronic diseases like heart disease and diabetes.¹¹ Between 40 and 60 percent of people in recovery will relapse at some point.

It's important for the individual in recovery and family members to understand that relapse and other setbacks are not the catastrophe they were once considered to be. Relapse is now widely regarded as an opportunity to evaluate the recovery plan and determine what went wrong, then take steps to develop the missing skills that led to the relapse.

How you approach setbacks can make a big difference in continued recovery.¹² People who regard setbacks as a personal failure are likely to disregard all of the positive gains made in recovery and may feel that sobriety is too difficult to achieve and give up altogether. Conversely, those who view setbacks as a catalyst for re-evaluating the recovery plan, identifying the missing skills that led to the setback and developing those missing skills will likely get back on the road to recovery stronger than before, with more resolve and motivation to achieve long-term sobriety.



Family involvement in treatment and recovery has been shown to help prevent relapse, but relapse is always possible. Knowing the stages of relapse and the signs associated with each stage can help family members recognize an impending setback and help their loved one avoid relapse by intervening and ensuring the loved one gets the support needed to get back on track.

A man with short, light brown hair is running on a paved path in a park. He is wearing a grey athletic tank top and black shorts. The path is surrounded by lush green trees and foliage. The lighting is soft, suggesting early morning or late afternoon. A yellow banner is overlaid on the bottom half of the image, containing the text 'The Guiding Principles of Recovery'.

The Guiding Principles of Recovery

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration has identified twelve principles of recovery that can help families stay on top of recovery goals and maintain long-term sobriety.¹³

These principles include the understanding that:

- There is no single pathway to recovery. Individuals work with treatment providers to develop an individualized recovery plan that includes therapy, developing a support system and making important lifestyle changes that promote long-term success.
- Recovery is a holistic endeavor that requires addressing the complex issues underlying the addiction and engaging in activities that promote healing of body, mind and spirit.
- Hope is the foundation of recovery. Holding on to hope for a better future, living mindfully and expressing gratitude are cornerstones of successful recovery.
- Recovery is supported by family, peers, allies and others in the community.
- Recovery is a process of improving physical and mental health, finding purpose and meaning in life and developing healthy relationships in the family and community.

The final principle is that recovery does happen. Through mindfulness, healthy communication, engaging with the community and finding purpose in life, recovery grows stronger every day. Keeping your guard up and mindfully making healthy choices will lead to positive long-term outcomes. And when the whole family is engaged in the recovery process, the better the outcome for all involved.

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Treating Addiction at its Core

Therapy should treat more than just your symptoms. Addiction is a deeply rooted disease—one that can't simply be removed—and the emotions, history and attitudes behind your behaviors need to be resolved in order to heal your mind and body.

Balance creates strength. It is vital that your treatment includes various methodologies to create a solid foundation on which to build your recovery. Our fluid, individualized process completely focuses on your growth and leads you to long-lasting recovery.

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