

## The Power of Family

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From the moment we take the first step in recovery from the disease of addiction, we accept the principle that we are powerless. Intuitively we know this about many aspects of our lives, but sadly alcoholics and addicts struggle to their deaths with this concept when it comes to their own illness. In what appears almost a cruel irony, most of us accept with little effort that we are powerless over many things; the weather, natural disasters, random acts of violence or being stricken with a deadly disease. However, we strive to find solutions, some power somewhere to help us with our problems. In most all cases, we do not solve problems without help, without some outside assistance. Individually, we clearly understand and accept that we are powerless over much in life that as a group we are not. The old saying, "It takes a village" strikes a chord when we look at raising money for a charitable cause, dealing with crime or educating our children. As alcoholics in recovery, we embrace the power of a group in the first step of Alcoholics Anonymous when "we admit we are powerless over alcohol . . ." and join together in seeking wellness.

But, what about our own personal "villages" . . . our families? When it comes to the disease of addiction and recovery from that disease, is there any "power" there? If we are to really get a hold on all the facets of recovery, it seems only fitting that we explore the influence of this unique, fascinating and at times, crazy system . . . the family.

About close-knit systems, certain truths we know. The first is that the disease of addiction does not only strike the person with the disease itself, it also impacts those closest to the alcoholic or addict . . . children, parents, spouses, siblings, grandparents, grandchildren, cousins, close friends; in sum, the family unit. These people suffer with a disease known as co-dependency. Each and every symptom of co-dependency mirrors the symptoms of alcoholism. "Mirror, Mirror on the wall . . . who's the most angry, controlling, manipulative, fearful beast of all?? Why it's . . . it's . . . it's . . . YOU and YOU and YOU", they cry in unison as they point their bony fingers of blame at each other. Think again. Pointing fingers always point back at the one doing the pointing. As they begin to recover, *if* they begin to recover, family members recognize the insane truth of their own individual existences as well as the collective craziness of the family unit. And, as that happens, they become a powerful force within their own right.

As with the alcoholic, the transformation of a sick family to a healthy family is nothing short of a miracle. Discarding the chains of their co-dependency, family and friends no longer skulk around looking for evidence of drinking or drugging. They no longer badger, blame and shame their loved ones (including other co's in the family) and they no longer hide or enable the consequences that flood in faster and more furious as the disease of addiction advances. They learn new tools, new ways of living and they branch into healthier lives of their own. They set proper boundaries and do not turn a blind eye when the abnormal attempts to masquerade as normal. They work a program of their own, get outside help where appropriate and, ultimately, constructive change begins to take place.

The second truth is that when one part of a system changes other parts **must** change or the system no longer continues together as it once did. Think of connected gears that spin in a certain way. If one gear begins to turn in a different direction, grinding and friction occur until the other gears get in sync. If they don't, there is a breakdown. The same is true in a

family system. Simply put, when one member of a family begins to get well, other members must follow suit or the system as it has always existed will collapse. And, the more people within a family system that change, the more quickly the change takes place. Families that stop co-ing their sick loved one, that get on a path of recovery and stick to it **enable** their addicted loved one towards wellness. Is this powerful??

But, recovery is not a quick or painless walk in the park for families any more than it is for the addict. Families face the same resistance to change, the desire to fall back into the "old, familiar ways", the frustrations and fears of recovery that their addicted loved ones face. They confront the strong pull of their own disease to keep them sick. Wellness requires effort, but families that want it and scream out "I am tired of this s \_ \_ \_ and I'm not going to take it any more" must discard old ways of thinking, believing and acting, just as their addicted loved ones must do. Out with the old --- but oh so familiar, comfortable albeit dysfunctional ways of behaving --- and in with the new. It requires time, effort, patience, but most of all "the willingness to go to any lengths" and to keep going for the long haul. The old adage "what's good for the goose is good for the gander" could not hold more true when it comes to the recovery of alcoholics, addicts and their families. So, families that want their addicted loved one to change had best be willing to step up to the plate and change themselves. The ones that step out and lead fare best of all as they set the example.

The final truth is perhaps the most ironic but predictable of all and that is that alcoholics in recovery will not stay with co's that continue in their co-dependent illness. If we revisit the "gear" family, all dysfunctionally functional, spinning in their disease, and we remove the alcoholic to treat the addictive disease only to put him back as a recovering person into the dysfunctional system he left just recently, only one of two things can happen. Either the alcoholic relapses and goes back into the old ill ways or he leaves the system.

All of this is quite simple, really. Just like the program of recovery. Health begets health; illness begets illness. I have seen families that have gotten well and because of that their addicted loved has started the road to recovery and continues to stay on it. Tragically, I have seen the opposite; families that have stayed sick and, although their loved one has gone to treatment, the addict fails to get well and stay well. Are families responsible for their addict's recovery? Of course not. They are responsible for their own. But, the simple truth is that addicts that go back to families that are getting well stand a much better chance of getting well and staying well themselves. Addicts that go back into family systems that do not get well stand a much greater chance of going back into their addiction and staying sick.

So, do families have power? I leave that to you to decide . . .

**First in a series of articles about family**