

The Role of the Family in Addiction & Recovery

By Hugh C. McBride

If one of your family members is struggling with alcoholism or drug addiction, there are two important facts that you need to know:

1. Your actions can help (or hinder) your loved one's ability to achieve and maintain long-term addiction recovery.
2. The addiction and its treatment will impact your life and the lives of other family members.

Addiction is a family disease, and understanding how this disease can impact and be affected by the actions of others can significantly improve your chances of making the best decisions for yourself and for your addicted family member.

Codependency & Enabling

Relationships among addicted individuals and their loved ones are often described using the terms "codependency" and "enabling." The following are solid general definitions of these terms:

Codependency – In her book, *Co-dependent No More: How to Stop Controlling Others and Start Caring for Yourself*, author Melody Beattie describes codependency as "a pattern of detrimental, behavioral interactions within a dysfunctional relationship ... A codependent person is one who has let another person's behavior affect him or her, and who is obsessed with controlling that person's behavior." Beattie's book also lists the following common thoughts and feelings that are often experienced by codependent individuals:

- It's not OK for me to feel.
- It's not OK for me to have problems
- It's not OK for me to have fun.
- I'm not lovable.
- I'm not good enough.
- If people act bad or crazy, I'm responsible.

Enabling –The Partnership for a Drug Free America describes enabling as "behaviors by family members that allow people with substance use problems to avoid the negative consequences of their actions." Examples of enabling include:

- Paying the addicted person's bills when drugs have used up all of their money.
Covering up for addiction-related problems at the person's workplace.
- Making excuses or simply remaining silent in the face of inappropriate or destructive behaviors that have resulted from substance abuse.

If someone you love is struggling with an addiction, you understandably don't want this person to lose their job, their family or their health as a result of their substance abuse. But as the definitions of codependency and enabling make clear, taking what you might rationalize as "helpful" steps may actually have the opposite effect – you may actually be allowing the addict to continue abusing drugs, and may be enabling the addiction to exert greater influence over your family.

Sticking to the Script

Though you've often used the word "drama" when describing the problems that addiction has visited upon your family, you may never have realized that you and your relatives are actually playing well-defined roles and following a dark script.

The following are six common roles that may be played by members of families whose lives have been impacted by addiction:

- **The addict** – This is the person who is directly engaging in the inappropriate behavior. The addict's behavior is not limited to substance abuse – for example, it may take the form of compulsive gambling, an eating disorder, or other types of dangerous and dysfunctional behaviors.
- **The hero** – The hero does whatever needs to be done to "fix" the problems and keep everyone as happy as they can be under the circumstances. One example of the hero is the older brother who makes sure that the younger children are fed, clothed and off to school when mom or dad is too drunk, too hungover or not even home at all, and then goes to school and gets straight As.
- **The scapegoat** – The scapegoat distracts attention from the addict and attracts attention to himself by behaving badly. The scapegoat is usually acting out of misdirected (perhaps even unconscious) anger at the pain that addiction has caused.
- **The mascot** – The mascot is the family jester. Mascots divert the family's attention from the pain and drama of their dysfunction by telling jokes and doing whatever else is necessary to keep other family members smiling. Though often outwardly confident and popular, mascots often have difficulties making real connections with people, relying instead on superficial, humorous relationships.
- **The lost child** – The lost child may also be referred to as the invisible child. Because of the addict's behaviors and the varied resultant behaviors of the other family members – the hero's overachieving, the mascot's goofiness, the scapegoat's misbehaviors – the lost child is often overlooked to the point of being forgotten.
- **The caretaker** – Also referred to as primary enablers, caretakers define themselves by their ability to "protect" the addict. From cleaning up addiction-related messes (both figurative and literal) to possibly even procuring drugs for the addict, caretakers substitute an ability to take care of their own emotional health by exerting control over the addict.

Helping the Addict, Healing the Family

Clearly, one person's struggle with addiction can both impact and be affected by the decisions, actions and behaviors of the entire family. And though most family members of addicts would state their desire to see the addict overcome the disease, in truth this healing may be subverted by the other family members' refusal to abandon the codependent and enabling roles they have been playing.