



Parents in Recovery: Healing is the Goal

by Nan Reynolds

There are a zillion recovery issues for parents of a child in treatment for chemical dependency. That is why it is important to connect with an ongoing support system, such as Families Anonymous, Tough Love, or Al-Anon and/or a family counselor. These systems can be thought of as a "holding tank" for the relationship with recovery and with the child (or adult child), while changes occur. And they will!!

One surprise is the feelings of loss. Besides a loss of sleep and money and time, there is a loss of "the familiar." It feels like you're not in Kansas anymore, yet there is no yellow brick road to follow.

Most parents say they no longer have much confidence in themselves as parents. They feel unsure and shaky about their guidelines and boundaries. This is normal—and also why ongoing support is needed. Monkeys have stronger peer groups than we humans do these days!

Besides the diminished confidence in self, parents feel loss of trust, loss of the prior relationship with their child, loss of perception, loss of an expectation or dream, and loss of their own privacy when the child begins to talk with the counselor. Most kids will spill the family beans. Or at least the strong kids will—and the strong family will begin to heal as a result.

The feelings involved can be a roller coaster ride. Parents are usually relieved—not to mention pooped, guilty, shamed, confused, scared and overwhelmed. Eventually there is pride and much gratitude. Having a son or daughter who needs treatment is a bittersweet experience. As the sign said at a Tough Love meeting: "We're

so glad to see you and so sorry you have to be here."

It is also said that sometimes the hardest things to do are the things we need to quit doing. This is really a toughie for parents to grasp—much less to actually follow. There is so much that seems like "loving" behavior that really can be a major part of the problem. To let your child deal with all the consequences of his/her behaviors can run right into a parent's need to protect, fix or excuse.

For example, parents often start their own day acting as a human alarm clock to make sure that the sleeper gets to school or work on time. This is common and even understandable, but does not promote self responsibility. The person in recovery needs to get an alarm clock and needs to use it. The parents need to put a pillow over their ears and let this happen—or not. Parents need to fade in the over functioning department, but it is hard to do.

A final thought about issues for parents has to do with the process of healing. As the child, or adult child, begins to share complaints and hurts, it is natural for the parents to want to defend themselves. Don't. The only way to heal and move forward is to honor the perception of the other person and try not to explain, defend, or argue. People's realities rarely match, and it doesn't really matter if healing is the goal.

Parents need to listen and make amends for whatever has occurred in the mind and heart of the child, or at least express regret that they felt hurt. Most parents do not set out to hurt, yet we all can fail so miserably, even in our best efforts and intentions.

Once "heard", children almost always are interested in loving their parents, and most parents want the family members to improve together. That is the hope, the goal, and the possibility of a recovering family.

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