



The Trauma of Family Recovery

By Stephanie Brown

In 1989 Virginia Lewis and I began the Family Recovery Research Project at the Mental Research Institute in Palo Alto to address several basic questions:

What is the process of recovery for the family? What happens over time when one or both parents stop drinking? What is the impact of this major change on the family and on individuals within? What is the impact of sobriety on children? We have found that recovery is extremely positive for these families in the long run, but in the short run of Transition (the move from drinking to abstinence) as well as Early Recovery (the stabilization of abstinence with new learning, uncertainty and constant change) the going is rough. Instead of feeling confidence because of the achievement of abstinence, the alcoholic and family feel powerless, confused and ignorant about what all this means and what to do. And this is when all goes well. One of the main reasons that Transition is so hard for children, is the often drastic change in reality. What was denied before, the drinking, is now the acknowledged focus of everything. It is a shock to kids to have their parents change their view and explanations of reality so dramatically and quickly. This threatens the child's developing experience of self and challenges the child's confidence in his or her own perceptions, explanations and feelings. Children who grew up with alcoholism as "normal," find new recovery very abnormal and often terrifying. As parents remain in various stages and states of denial themselves in this critical time period, their view of reality is likely to be confused and confounded by the distortions of the drinking that continue side by side with the rapid shift to telling the truth in recovery. One adult child told her family in an interview that they were in as much denial as before, only now it wasn't about drinking. She said that, after three years of recovery, her mother is still in charge of what can be known and said.

Children may experience a parent's abstinence and the intense focus on

recovery as a terrible intrusion into their own normal development. We found that, depending on many different family circumstances, preadolescent children are better able to join parents in the new process, adjusting their views of their lives and their reality to match the changing perceptions and beliefs of their parents. As kids get closer to adolescence, they feel more threatened by the sudden change in reality. They are approaching the beginnings of detachment and separation and may feel thwarted when the family loses its stability, even though abstinence is positive. Adolescents indicate that they are too close to growing up to change their entire view of themselves. The environment stabilizes and there is less chaos, turmoil and disruption as parents settle into predictable routines of meetings and recovery work. Parents are less dominated by old impulses. They can talk about their experiences and listen to their children. For most, things are better, though there may be continuing stress between the parents, which causes anxiety and tension in the family.

Frequently parents still can't communicate and may not be sure yet whether they will survive as a couple, or even if they want to. One couple told us: "*Before we communicated with our emotions and our behavior. Now we want to talk, but we don't know how!*"

Some kids love Early Recovery: they feel safe, secure, parents are available, and life is much, much better. For others, it isn't so good. According to Jane and Len: "the kids looked at us as if we were crazy. We were talking this new 12 step language and all wrapped up in ourselves. Several times we saw them looking at each other with a shrug: fine, but what about us?"

It's important for adults to consider the needs of their children as they reorganize their lives around the new focus of recovery. There can be a vacuum of care, attention and support that children desperately need. There are also positives. The Robinson children, Andrea, 19, and Patrick, 15, illustrate the positive evolving

experience of Early Recovery. Andrea says, "I didn't like my father after recovery. I couldn't trust him, and he was an ass. Before I could get away with anything, and now he was telling me what to do. I like having one parent so I just blocked him out. He tried to jump back in and be my Dad, and I didn't want it. It took me a year to let him in, and then I started to like him. But I stayed angry, too; I kept a wall up as I watched. I was afraid that I'd be hurt... I wrote a poem for my father. It was hard. I didn't want him to know I cared so much. My most important feeling now is that I can rely on him. After three years, it's wonderful."

What To Do

Educational support groups can be valuable, as can Alateen. These groups normalize feelings and provide peer support in dealing with the reality of alcoholism and the problems of both drinking and recovering parents. We also advocate parenting instruction and family education in treatment and during recovery. It is also helpful to have the support of mentors-- those couples and families who have come before, been in recovery, and survived to tell others about it. We believe that education about the normal process of turmoil and dramatic change can prevent many problems related to the trauma of recovery. Exposure to the experience of others is tremendously helpful to newcomers still in the state of crisis, uncertainty and massive disruption. Some parents in our research said they had regrets about recovery-- they had failed their kids, often because they simply didn't know. It doesn't have to be. Education, community, and mentor support can fill the holes.

Note: This article is adapted from The Alcoholic Family in Recovery: A Developmental Model by Stephanie Brown, Ph.D., and Virginia Lewis, Ph.D., published by Guilford Press, fall, 1998.

Dr. Brown is a NACoA founder and a member of the current NACoA Advisory Board. Breakout: Children who grew up with alcoholism as "normal," find new recovery very abnormal and often terrifying.