



Helping Kids and Teens Understand Abstinence, Sobriety, and Recovery

Many teenagers believe that “if Mom or Dad would only stop drinking, everything would be fine.” “Life will be so much better if the drinking would stop.” “I’ll get ‘my Dad’ back if he could just throw the pills away.” It is true that alcohol can stimulate other unwanted behaviors, and when the drinking or substance use stops some of these behaviors stop as well. A drunk parent may become mean, a father may spend a great deal of money on alcohol or drugs, or a mother may be negligent of younger children when drunk and passed out. Unfortunately, however, when a person stops drinking or using substances, the family problems don’t immediately disappear.

The reality is that stopping the behavior, or abstinence, is a very important first step of a process that leads to sobriety and recovery. So, what do these other terms mean?

SOBRIETY

When a person with addiction stops drinking or using drugs, the brain starts to change. At first, because the brain believes the body needs the alcohol to live, it can be much harder to be around a person who continues to not drink. In the beginning, it may actually feel like things are getting worse instead of better. As time continues – as a person remains sober – the brain starts to change in ways that are positive. This is a good thing, and it helps a person become healthier. It is kind of like a heart attack, where a person afterwards may need to change a number of behaviors (eating habits, exercise, sleep, length of time at work, stress management). The cardiac patient may also need to see other specialists to fully treat the problem to avoid more heart attacks. With addiction, a person must consider many lifestyle changes, and seek additional treatment or attend 12-step meetings, in order to continue to improve. Without this continued care, a person can get stuck feeling miserable because they aren’t drinking, but they aren’t getting healthier. Oftentimes, people refer to this feeling of being stuck as being a “dry drunk.” Sometimes, if not involved in continued care, alternative bad behaviors may replace the drinking. Instead of getting better, they turn to other things to help the bad feelings go away.

RECOVERY

The easiest way to think about it is that sobriety is the continued state of not drinking and recovery is the process of healing a person physically and emotionally from the disease of addiction. Through the lifestyle changes, additional treatment, and/or 12 step meetings, a person seeks to develop a healthy mind, sound body, and logical decision making. Recovery requires a regular commitment to working on better communication skills, healthier thinking, and effective mindfulness to find contentment in life. It is this contentment in mind, body and spirit that is often referred to as serenity. In recovery, through these many changes, individuals transform into parents who are more available for the entire family, communicate in a healthier way, and overall appear more happy and content. The changes may look very different than what was expected, but a healthier parent in recovery is a person of greater understanding, gratitude and overall wellness that benefits the entire family.

For family members, it can be hard and, yet wonderful, to watch these changes. And important for them to heal too!