Addiction: The Family Disease
Symptoms, Behaviors, Feelings

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Family Strategies

Definition of Family Disease
- Addiction affects the entire family. In an addictive family system, the disease becomes the organizing principle.
- The addicted person becomes the central figure around which family members organize their behaviors and reactions.
- This family system becomes unpredictable, chaotic and frightening.
- Traumatized family members develop their own symptoms as a result.

The Family Disease: Symptoms Preoccupation

**Addicted Loved One:**
- Repetitive focus connected to addictive behaviors
  - "I wonder if there’s enough booze at home or if my dealer will be home or if I have enough money for my drugs."

**Codependent Family Member:**
- Inability to focus on other things; experiences intrusive thoughts about addicted person.
  - "I wonder where my husband is, who he is with and what I will say to him when he gets home."
### Family Disease: Symptoms

#### Increased Tolerance

**Addicted Loved One:**
- "I used to get drunk on six beers. Now it takes a dozen."

**Codependent Family Member:**
- "She used to be critical of me and I would get really upset; now she calls me horrible names and it’s no big deal to me."

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#### Loss of Control

**Addicted Loved One:**
- "I told myself I was only going to spend 50 dollars at the casino and lost my whole paycheck before I left."
- "I told myself I would only have one glass of wine at the wedding, and I got drunk and passed out."

**Codependent Family Member:**
- "When I know that he is going to be late for dinner again, my plan is to give him the cold shoulder and go about my business. But, on occasion I’ll snap."
- "Yesterday I planned on ignoring him, but I ended up screaming in front of the kids. I, not my husband, was out of control."

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#### Blackouts

**Addicted Loved One:**
- "I don’t know where I was, what I did, or who I was with last night."

**Codependent Family Member:**
- "We had a screaming fight the other night. I don’t remember exactly what I said or anything about the drive home."
Family Disease: Symptoms

**Craving**

**Addicted Loved One:**
- A severe physical or psychological urge or craving to reengage in the substance or behavior.
  - "I wanted cocaine so bad I could taste it."

**Codependent Family Member:**
- A deep psychological craving or desire for the addicted loved one.
  - "I really miss her. When she is gone, I ache for her."

**Family Disease: Symptoms
Compulsive Behavior**

**Addicted Loved One:**
- Feeling driven / obsessed to engage in addictive behaviors repeatedly
  - "When I had a craving, I knew I shouldn’t drink, but the thoughts just wouldn’t stop. I found myself in the bar last night anyway."

**Codependent Family Member:**
- Feeling driven/obsessed to engage in compulsive behaviors (snooping, spending $, eating…)
  - "My house is clean, with everything in its place. It makes up for how I feel inside."

**Family Disease: Symptoms Decreased Tolerance (Latter Stage)**

**Addicted Loved One:**
- Cannot engage or use to the extent he/she once did
  - "I used to be able to stay out for hours using, and now I am in trouble shortly after I begin."

**Codependent Family Member:**
- Less patient / Less likely to stay in denial
  - "I can’t take any more. Everything he/she does irritates me."
Family Disease: Symptoms
Medical Problems (Latter Stage)

**Addicted Loved One:**
- Physical problems may escalate
- Problems related to unsafe practices, accidents and injuries may become more frequent.

**Codependent Family Member:**
- Stress-related health problems likely (autoimmune disorders)
- Less apt to prioritize healthy habits due to focus on others

- "I used running marathons as proof I was healthy, fueling my denial about my substance abuse. Then lab results from a check-up showed I was silently becoming physically sick."

**Addicted Loved One:**
- Stress-related health problems likely (autoimmune disorders)
- Less apt to prioritize healthy habits due to focus on others

- "I can’t sleep at night and now I have chronic headaches."

**Codependent Family Member:**
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Family Disease: Behaviors
Rationalizing

**Addicted Loved One:**
- Attempt to explain or justify one’s behavior/attitude with logical, plausible reasons – even if untrue.

- "I work hard. I deserve my ‘high’ time."

**Codependent Family Member:**
- Attempt to explain or justify another’s behavior/attitude with logical, plausible reasons – even if untrue.

- "He had a rough childhood, so of course he drinks a lot."

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Family Disease: Behaviors
Minimizing

**Addicted Loved One:**
- "But it’s not this way most of the time."

**Codependent Family Member:**
- "It’s not always this bad."
Family Disease: Behaviors

Blaming

**Addicted Loved One:**
- "If my partner would do her part, I wouldn’t have to get high."
- "If he didn’t yell at me all the time I wouldn’t get so stressed and have to drink just to relax."

**Codependent Family Member:**
- "It’s his co-worker’s fault he got fired."
- "It’s the crowd/bad influences that he is hanging around."

Sneaking/Lying

**Addicted Loved One:**
- "I have to lie to cover my losses."
- "I make my trip to the liquor store during lunch so I’m not late coming home."

**Codependent Family Member:**
- "I lied to his boss for him."
- "I’ve marked the level on liquor bottles to see how much he drank since yesterday."

Hiding/Secrets

**Addicted Loved One:**
- "My wife knows I drink alcohol but not that I use cocaine and gamble."
- "I’ve been hiding my empty bottles in the neighbor’s trash."

**Codependent Family Member:**
- "I didn’t tell anyone I found her passed out on the floor."
- "I’ve been hiding her empty bottles in the dumpster at work so the neighbors don’t see them."
### Family Disease: Behaviors

**Isolating**

**Addicted Loved One:**
- “I don’t go out with my friends anymore. My only relationship is with my drug.”

**Codependent Family Member:**
- “When I hear the garage door go up, I just go in my room.”
- “I don’t see my friends anymore.”

### Family Disease: Behaviors

**Euphoric Recall**

**Addicted Loved One:**
- “It’s such a rush – I just want that feeling again.”

**Codependent Family Member:**
- “I just want the man I married back.”
- “I just want my son/daughter back.”

### Family Disease: Feelings

- Anger
- Loneliness
- Sadness
- Anxiety
- Guilt
- Fear
- Shame
Family Disease:
Roles

The Enabler

The Enabler is the family member, often a spouse, who steps in and protects the addict from the consequences of their behavior. The motivation for this may not be just to protect the alcoholic, but to avoid embarrassment, reduce anxiety, avoid conflict or to maintain some control over a difficult situation.

Family Disease:
Roles

The Hero

The Hero is the family member who attempts to distract attention away from the alcoholic by excelling, performing well, and generally being “too good to be true.” The Hero has a hope that somehow their behavior will help the addict to stop using. But, their performance-based behavior helps them to block emotional pain and disappointment they feel in their family.

Family Disease:
Roles

The Scapegoat

The Scapegoat is the family member who draws attention away from the family’s real problem by creating other problems and concerns. This can be through misbehavior, bad grades, and/or their own substance use. The Scapegoat can be very successful at diverting the family’s and others’ attention away from the addicted person.
Family Disease:
Roles

The Lost Child

The Lost Child is the family member who appears to be ignoring the problem completely. If there is a fight, the Lost Child will likely be absent. They are often perceived as “good” children because they spend lots of time alone with books or involved in isolated activities. While the Lost Child will not be successful at drawing attention away from the family problem, they certainly will reduce the stress for themselves by avoiding it entirely.

Family Disease:
Roles

The Mascot

The Mascot attempts to use humor to shield themselves and others from the pain of the problems caused by addiction. They will often act out by “clowning around,” cracking jokes, or making light of serious situations. While the Mascot can certainly help lighten up a desperate situation, the real intent is to ease tension, keep the peace, and be a distraction. Many comedians come from dysfunctional homes.

Stages of Family Recovery

Brown & Lewis

Disengaged
- Stage 1 – Enabling
- Stage 2 – Transition
- Stage 3 – Early Recovery
- Stage 4 – Ongoing Recovery
Stage 1 - Enabling

- Denial
- Reactive stance
- Preoccupation with addict/alcoholic
- Controlling behavior

Stage 1 Interventions

Therapist tasks Basic attending skills (important to stay here for a while)
- Create safety (rituals/routines for therapy sessions)
- Develop therapeutic alliance that supports challenging denial & acknowledges reality of alcohol/drug use

Stage 1 interventions

- Focus on behaviors & distorted beliefs that maintain unhealthy behaviors
- Use historical information to help family members understand meaning of alcoholism & meaning of recovery
- Begin to challenge defensiveness to see how client responds
Stage 2 - Transition

- Breakdown of denial
- Beginning focus on self
- Admission of loss of control
- Possibly starting therapy or al-anon

Stage 2 Interventions

Therapist tasks: Break through Denial with empathetic responses
- Begin to challenge core beliefs (offer a different perspective to dispute distorted beliefs)
- Help to realize family life is out of control

Stage 2 Interventions

- Shift focus from family to individual (Detachment & Individual Recovery)
- Encourage outside support (12 step meetings for families, support groups, friends & other family members)
Stage 3 – Early Recovery

- Focused on self
- Accepts identity of co-dependent
- Reliance on external supports
- Focus is on behavior change

Stage 3 Interventions

Therapist task: Maintain focus on individual recovery
- Supportively challenge mixed messages and discrepancies
- Education on disease symptoms/behaviors (both addicted individual & codependent family member)

Stage 3 Interventions

- Assist with identifying feelings & focus client on telling their story
- Assist client with learning and practicing recovery language
Stage 4 – Ongoing Recovery

- Can focus on self and family
- Outside supports firmly in place
- Working 12-step program, has a sponsor
- Feeling of safety and trust in process of recovery
- Able to address trauma of the past

Stage 4 Interventions

Therapist task: Continue to expand new identity
- Encourage to maintain contact with external support
- Help client work through shame/guilt/consequences
Stage 4 Interventions

- Begin to focus on couple & family issues
- Assist with finding balance between individual and family recoveries