

Addiction and Family Relationships: The Impact on Family Systems

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What is Addiction?

Addiction is a chronic, often relapsing brain disease that causes compulsive drug seeking and use, despite harmful consequences to the addicted individual and to those around him or her.

National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2012

The Problem

Substance Abuse impacts the Whole Person as it is a multi-faceted problem:

- **Physical**
- **Mental**
- **Emotional**
- **Spiritual**
- **Social/Family/Community**
- **Vocational**

Myths about addiction that still persist...

Addiction is a moral weakness

They must hit rock bottom to recover

You have to want treatment

More likely among minorities

Alcohol is not really a drug

You can abstain from your drug of choice but still use other mood altering substances

You can just quit if you really want to

Myths about addiction that still persist...

If you use drugs or alcohol after treatment, recovery is hopeless

Abuse is a preventable behavior

Treatment for substance abuse is “one size fits all”

Once sober for long periods of time the disease goes away

Family Unit

By definition, a family system functions because it is a unit, and every family member plays a critical, if not unique, role in the system. As such, it is not possible that one member of the system can change without causing a ripple effect of change throughout the family system.

Family Functioning

Families are active systems and are influenced by changes that occur both inside and outside of the family system.

Natural tendency of families are to behave in such a manner as to maintain a sense of safety, structure, and the ability to survive in the face of change.

It is this desire to be “normal” which actually works against positive change in the family system.

Family Functioning the Strive for Normal

Bottom line:

People want to feel “normal”.

Family systems want to be “normal”.

The Disease Impact on Families: Crisis and Chaos become normal

The crisis is the event or series of events that occur when the family system is shaken and the truth of the problem is realized. The question then becomes, “How did we get here?” The common initial step of the family is to find help for the identified addict to address the addiction. The remainder of the family, which is the majority of the system, will experience initial relief in the hope that the “Problem” is now being addressed and resolved. The original event of crisis/chaos, and questions of, “How did we get here?” quickly dissolves. This is when and where the intervention of the family system is necessary to engage the family in a shift toward their own recovery and focus on the impact of the “Family Disease”.

Introduction to the Family Disease

As a Family Disease, the Family becomes disconnected. The once vibrant, healthy, working system, falls into crisis and chaos. As the chemical dependency progresses, so does the family disease. The symptoms of the Family Disease progress as the Family attempts to find ways to survive within the problem.

The Family Disease mirrors the disease of addiction. Typically, all family members are affected, to one degree or another; however not all family members will experience all the symptoms or impacts of the Family Disease. The Family Disease can be described as the process of becoming hyper-focused on the identified addict, therefore losing the ability to choose his/her own focus. As the Family Disease progresses, the family members physical, mental, emotional, social, vocational, and spiritual health begins to decline and they become unable to practice self care.

Families are not “dysfunctional”, but they learn new ways to “function”

- Each Family System is as Unique as a Fingerprint
- **OPEN**... Allow Differences...Encouraging...Accepting... Two-Way Open Communication...Honoring Boundaries...Trusting
- **CLOSED**...Secrets...No Communication...Not Honoring Boundaries...Not Listening or Being Heard... “Don’t Talk- Don’t Trust-Don’t Feel”...Controller... “Crazy-Making”
- More and more of the focus and attention is directed at the “Identified Patient” and away from self and other family members

Family Systems

- Families systems are fluid. They move between open and closed systems which govern how family members act out their roles.
- Open: balance of power, and energy is spent on promoting positive change.
- Closed: operate on a sense of maintain safety and sameness.
- The open and closed system produce rules that govern:
 - How, what, and when to communicate feelings or thoughts
 - Who has permission to speak to whom about what
 - Extent to which a family member may be different
 - How sexuality can be expressed
 - What it means to be male or female
 - How family members acquire self-worth

Addiction Affected Family Rules

Don't talk

Don't trust

Don't feel

Rule Themes often revolve around

- Family Functioning agreement (Keep stuff “normal”)
- Emotions seen as threatening (Don't you cry)

Family Roles

In an addictive system the disease becomes the organizing event. The affected person (addict) becomes the central figure from which the rest of the family organizes their behaviors and reactions, which happens slowly over time. To survive in this system of chaos and crisis, the family adopt certain roles

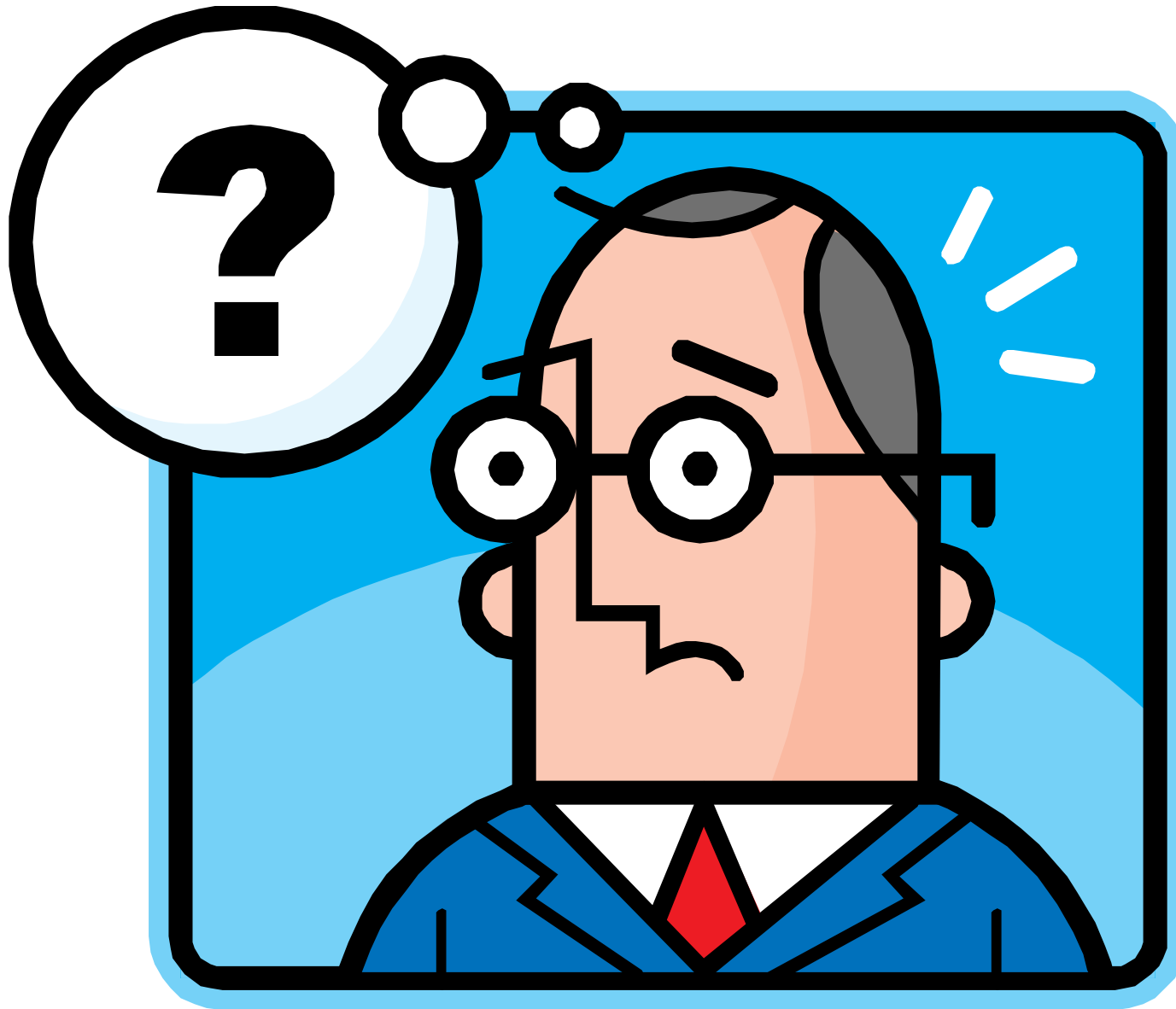
- Hero (Responsible One)**
- Placater (People Pleaser)**
- Scapegoat (Acting Out One)**
- Lost Child (The Adjuster)**
- Mascot (The Clown)**

Misunderstandings by Family Regarding Treatment

- Once the Addict/Alcoholic agrees to enter treatment, they will never drink or use drugs again
- Once the Addict /Alcoholic comes home, things will be the way they used to be
- If the Addict/Alcoholic agrees to get help, the rest of the family will be fine
- The crisis/chaos is over

Resources

- Treatment
 - Therapist
 - AA/Al-Anon
- Self (Place the oxygen mask...)



CIGNA BEHAVIORAL HEALTH AWARENESS

If you are a Cigna customer and have questions about Substance Use treatment or about your benefits and how to use them, please contact me:

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