

Family Recovery

What is the process of recovery for the family? What happens over time when one or both parents stop drinking? Are there stages, similar to those identified for the individual? What is the impact of this major change on the family and on individuals within? What is the impact of sobriety on children?

Stages of recovery which follow hold true for the family, according to a 10-year study conducted by clinicians at the Mental Research Institute in Palo Alto, Calif.

- * Drinking
- * Transition
- * Early Recovery, (the stabilization of abstinence with new learning, much uncertainty and constant change)
- * Ongoing Recovery (when massive change has been consolidated and the family is guided by the organizing norms, values and beliefs of recovery)

The Family Recovery Research Project showed that recovery is extremely positive for families in the long run, but in the short run of Transition and Early Recovery, the going is rough for one to five years. The early months and years are so difficult that the process is called the “trauma of recovery.”

Transition

Transition is a time of intense disruption and turmoil. Families often assume that when the alcoholic stops drinking there will be no more fighting, no more abuse and no more irresponsibility. They assume that abstinence will solve the family’s problems, since it was the drinking, in their view that caused them. In fact, this newly abstinent phase is likely characterized by all the same behavior, distorted logic, confusion and

chaos of drinking. The only difference for most families is the absence of alcohol use. While this is beneficial, the absence of alcohol also uncovers serious problems that were hidden by the drinking and new problems arise, because no one knows how to behave or what to think in this new state. They may feel that a return to drinking would help. The unknown often feels frightening and much worse than the previous “knowns” of drinking or reacting to someone else’s drinking.

None of the old rules, roles or responses fit anymore, but there are no automatic replacements. What feels automatic is a return to the familiar — the behaviors, thinking and relationship patterns that supported continued drinking. 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 do they do. And this is when all goes well.

An unsafe environment

The trauma of recovery is a state of chaos that can be frightening, negative and worse than drinking in the family’s view.

Children often feel more unsafe now than they felt during the drinking because everything is unknown and unpredictable. Many children say they worried a lot about whether or when a parent was going to drink, or become angry or enraged in response to the anxieties of withdrawal and new abstinence.

The environment may remain unsafe for a long time. As parents reach outside the family to treatment and 12-step supports, the children ironically may feel and may be, more abandoned than they were during the drinking. And, they may be more frightened, if no one knows what is happening, and no one is in charge of their care. Sam recalled what it was like when his mother first stopped drinking:

“I spent the first two years of their recovery in my room alone, with my headphones on. I knew there would be something to eat, but I didn’t know what or when. I tried not to be upset, or to have needs, because my parents were working so hard on their recoveries.”

Kids can weather transition well if they are protected, informed in age-appropriate terms and reassured — all tasks for the parents, treatment

personnel and therapists. A mother remembers:

“We were in an uproar; chaos. And this was after Matt went to treatment. The kids felt their whole world crumbled after he stopped drinking. Several weeks into treatment we became an identified ‘alcoholic family’ and things started to get better. That identity gave us stability and a way of understanding what was happening. We began to make sense of all that we had hidden and denied during the drinking. The kids didn’t like it at all — this was a nightmare — but it was reality and naming it helped us all over time.”

Family turmoil

Confusion in role is common. Old roles don’t fit anymore, but new ones aren’t clear, or even possible because the family is in such turmoil. The emotional relationship between the parents is likely to be painful and strained. The move toward the end of drinking may have included the threat of divorce, separation, frequent arguing and violence. The parents need to separate emotionally during this time to focus on their individual recoveries. Yet this necessary separation may be extremely anxiety-provoking to a child who longs for stability and promises that all will be well. Unfortunately, no one knows yet what will happen.

Mark, 18, whose alcoholic father (with four years of abstinence now) used to verbally rage and physically attack him, reflects:

“In the first two years, whenever he was gone, I was happy. I didn’t have to hide. When they would go to meetings, I wouldn’t have to be afraid; I could be free to live.”

Mark’s mother, who is also a recovering alcoholic, remembered what it was like for her as a mother:

“It was more devastating for me after my first treatment because I started drinking again. But now I knew what I was doing to my children and I was tormented. I was being abusive, inconsistent and I wasn’t going anywhere.”

Mark continued:

“It was harder when she started drinking again. We’d been in recovery. I’d gone to Alateen, and it wasn’t me slipping. But being a child, I couldn’t do anything. We no longer could be a family in recovery because she was drinking and everybody had stopped going to meetings. We had a ‘family slip.’ I stopped reading; no meetings. I went back to being awful.

Then I knew this wasn’t right. I knew they could be clean, healthy and reliable. People’s true personalities came out in recovery, so I knew what was possible. Before, when they were drinking, it was normal because we didn’t know. It was normal for them to be unstable. They were even predictable. It was chaotic, but we knew what to do. Now, it was much worse. I’d had a taste of recovery and then I had it taken away. It was pretty devastating.”

A change in reality

One of the main reasons 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, her parents are 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 of family recovery, 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,

although abstinence is positive.

Early Recovery

Early Recovery brings an increasing calm, a steady easing into the ongoing growth process that was set in motion during Transition. It is a long stage, accented more by degrees of accumulated and evolutionary growth than the rapid, radical instability and change of new abstinence. The environment stabilizes and there is less chaos, turmoil and disruption as parents have settled into predictable routines of meetings and recovery work. The positives build on the positives, which brings a greater experience of safety, trust and hope. Yet, 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 whether they want to.

Children in recovery

The experiences of children in Early Recovery are as varied as their particular family histories and circumstances. Some kids loved recovery: they felt safe, secure, parents were available, and life was much, much better. For others, it was not so good. Some wanted to be involved and some couldn't get far enough away. Most were glad about abstinence, but didn't want it to interfere with their needs.

Ironically, there remains a serious danger that children will be neglected and abandoned if both parents are enthusiastically committed to and following their individual programs of recovery. It is simply the case: what is best for the parents may not match the current needs of the children, though the parents' attention to building a solid foundation of recovery is vital to everyone's long-term well being.

Holly talked about the loss:

"There was a lot of chaos and confusion in the first two years as Mom was steeped in recovery. But I expected that I'd have her back after awhile. There was no more drinking and I could relax. Then why did I feel so bad for three, four and five years? I was so lonely, and angry. Mom had done what I wanted — stopped drinking. Now I was in need of a mom

and she wasn't around."

Recovery is not bad for kids. But the absence of parents and the trauma of the normal experience of Early Recovery can be: parents who are angry, scared, moody, arguing, threatening, out of control. So, it's important for adults to consider the needs of their children as they reorganize their lives around the new focus of recovery. There is a vacuum of care, attention and support that these children desperately need.

Support groups

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.

Children and adolescents will learn that they didn't cause the problems and the danger of isolation will be reduced. Children will also learn how to cope with family reality.

Parenting classes are a beneficial part of treatment. In the same way that addicted parents are learning to focus on recovery and add the structure of outside support groups, families can build in attention to children and rudimentary new family structures that will provide safety and a holding environment for children until abstinence becomes stabilized.

Although this can be a long process of difficult and traumatic change, there is a light at the end of the tunnel, and for many families, it's a bright, shining star.

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