



Dalgarno Drug & Alcohol Resource Team



D.A.R.T Member Paper

Families and addiction

**The oft forgotten piece in
the addiction puzzle.**

A highly experienced and long serving Alcohol and Other Drug Clinician writes (in accessible terms) on the negative and even destructive impact that personal drug use has on people and relationships within the substance user's immediate sphere of influence.

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Introduction

One of the great lies that many addicts believe is that their actions are only affecting themselves. Nobody else is getting hurt therefore they should be allowed to do as they please.

Unfortunately the choices that any of us make in life will almost invariably affect other people. How many is a debateable point but it does not take too much imagination to realise that one person's lifestyle decision can affect up to 20 people. There will be the immediate family of parents and siblings; the broader family of aunts, uncles, cousins and grandparents. Added to these groups will be employers, fellow workers etc. Depending on many other factors we can also consider the impact on friends and possible team mates, if we are involved in some type of sporting activity.

For the addict we could include all of the above and add a number of other groups - Police and other emergency services officers, insurance companies, the victims of any crime that may have been committed to gain money to finance the drug habit. In short when it comes to drugs we should understand that the whole community is affected. Our taxes are involved in financing the legal system. Our insurance premiums are affected by the impact of crime on the community. In many ways the broader community will be affected due to the laws that are introduced to deal with drug related crime. The facts are that drug abuse affects many, many people. However in this instance we are particularly interested in the impact on the family of the drug user. These people are often forgotten in our zeal to assist the drug user and in this paper we will be highlighting the family and how each person may be affected.

The Dawning

In many ways drug abuse sneaks up on a family. Because we have a strong desire to believe the best about our children it can be many, many months before a family realises that someone in the family has a drug problem. They may have noticed the changes in mood of the person concerned but explained those changes away as adolescence, or a broken relationship. They may have not realised that money had gone missing, just thought they had misplaced it. Similar thoughts probably came when dad couldn't find one of his power tools or mum wondered where some of her jewellery had gone to. Because these things happened over a period of time it just seemed like part of life happening around them. They may have even harboured some thoughts that drugs may be involved but quickly dismissed those thoughts as just being dramatic.

Eventually however the day comes when reality starts to break through, and even then it happens over time. It may start with the police at the door. It may be that the person with the drug problem informs the family that they have to be in court next week. Whatever situation it is that opens this doorway to reality we need to understand that the family will

more than likely be on a form of drip feed for the next few months. It is most unlikely that the whole truth will come out all at once. It will be one thing this week and then another next week and another the week after. It will be many months before the full trauma will be revealed, and I do not use the word trauma lightly. All this time the family will be looking for quick answers so that they can get back to normal. The truth is that they will never be the same again. Even after recovery has been worked through by the drug user, the effects on the family will go on. As the truth slowly comes out the family dynamics are slowly being altered. In classical terms the dysfunction in the family has been growing as everyone has been adapting their lives to cope with the increasing addiction of the addict in their midst. By the time the realisation has come that addiction is the issue this progress into dysfunction will have been well established.

Dysfunctional families do not suddenly appear on the horizon. Families do not wake up one morning and decide “we will become dysfunctional”. Just as the drug user does not decide on a given day to become a drug addict. This is a process of time, and accommodation of the changes taking place.

By the time it has become clear that a family member has a drug problem it is highly likely that that person has become the central figure in the family. Much of the family energy is directed towards dealing with this person’s needs. Often family members take on specific roles without even being aware they are doing so. For example we know that wherever there is someone with an addiction problem there will also be a co-dependent person. More than likely this co-dependent person will be a family member. As the family focuses more and more on the person with the problem, they focus less and less on each other thereby creating a family that is out of balance.

We may end up with a family looking like this:

- **Central person** (drug taker)
- **Mother**, (prime co-dependent), soft touch
- **Father**, trying to bring order, (the bad guy)
- **Eldest sibling**, angry
- **Next sibling**, perfect child
- **Next sibling**, family clown.

These roles will vary from family to family. In some cases the mother will be the prime co-dependent person while in other cases the father will fill that role. The above ‘line-up’ is only a guide. In truth each member of the family will have become co-dependent to varying degrees. In their co-dependency they will take on specific roles. This enables them to cope with life for a time.

In the above 'line-up' the mother has become the ally of the drug user rather than the ally of her husband. She has allied herself with the addicted person. The addicted person has successfully split the main source of cohesion in the home.

When this divide of parents happens the problem can then morph into a supra-cultural or, if you like, *spiritual* issue. If one subscribes to the Theological tenet, and submits to the Spiritual law that God joins parents together to not only lead, but provide provision, security and cohesion to the family, then another echelon of difficulty is experienced – This is evidenced (even unwittingly) in many a marriage vows, when the celebrant declares that ***“what God had joined together let no man divide”***. When one parent forms an alliance with a child in preference to their spouse they breach a spiritual principle and sacred bond.

Co-Dependence.

The co-dependent person believes that they are helping the addict. Co-dependents will make excuses for absences from work. They will pay unpaid bills. They will drive all over town on errands that the addict should do themselves. In short they will do whatever they think it takes to make life better for the addict. Quite often the reason they do this is because of fear. Fear that if they don't do it the addict may become aggressive towards them, or more commonly fear that if they don't do whatever they can then the addict will die.

I have seen co-dependent parents even go out and purchase heroin for their child and keep it in the family house and actually supply it to their teenager to stop the possibility of that addict being picked up by the police.

I have watched parents drive hundreds of kilometres to do something for their child. I have seen parents go thousands of dollars into debt to cover the bills and expenses of their addicted child.

I recall facilitating a support group for parents of addicts and listening to their stories of co-dependence. After a while I asked one father

“How long have you been doing this?”

He replied ***“at least 20 years”***.

I then asked ***“In all that time what difference to his drug taking behaviour have you seen?”***

He looked at the floor and said ***“none at all”***.

The truth is that the underlying fear of death, like most fears, has a degree of truth in it. There is the possibility that the addict will die. The greater truth is that if they do die it will not be the parents fault in any way, but trying to get a co-dependent person to see that and

act on it is no easy task. It is one thing for the co-dependent to hear that from a counsellor and actually understand it. It is quite another thing for them to hear it from their own flesh and blood as they are told ***“if you don’t take me to my dealers right now I will have to get my gear from somewhere else and it won’t be as pure as it is from my dealers and I could be dead in the morning and it will be your fault”***. As the addict manipulates the situation and pulls at the emotions of the parent you can be sure that they will cave in. The logic of what they heard from the counsellor is overruled by the fear and emotion of the moment.

What is happening for each person?

The responses will vary from time to time, but stereotypically the following is what can happen.

The father feels isolated and not needed. He may have tried to enforce certain rules in the home but has been overruled by his wife.

The eldest sibling can see what the addict is doing to the family. This person can see the excuses being made for the addict, the resources being spent on this one person at the expense of everyone else, and probably hears the thoughts of the other siblings before the parents ever do. This person sees what the family is going through but no-one is listening therefore this person becomes angry at everyone.

The next sibling can also see what is happening but decides that the best way to fix it is for them to be everything that the drug user is not and never be any trouble to the family. This child becomes perfect. Their demeanour is always pleasant, they remember people’s birthdays, they take on housework without asking, in short they are no trouble to anyone, and the parents will be left with two thoughts. Firstly, At least this child has no problems, and secondly a sense of greater guilt that they must have been such bad parents for the addict. Both of these thoughts are wrong.

The truth is that this child is simply covering the problems - they have adopted a façade. They have suppressed their true feelings which more than likely include a great sense of anger towards the addict. Eventually, at a later age, this person will change.

The last sibling tends to isolate themselves from the family and any interaction they do have results in humour, thus alleviating the tension in the household. Computer games can become their place of retreat as they seek to find their own way through the crisis. This child may feel intimidated by the rages of the addict and lives with a deep fear in their life.

A Healthy Family

The ideal is that we should grow up in a home where we are allowed to express things such as anger, disappointment, joy etc. and also learn how to do that in an appropriate manner. In the household of the addict, because so much of the focus is on the addict, the other

family members are not free to do this, thus their way of expressing things becomes skewed.

What is Really Going On?

During this traumatic period when the family have first realised that someone in the family is addicted the family will need all the support they can get. They will be in a state of shock much like finding out that someone in the family has a serious illness such as cancer, except that this is an illness that has little community understanding or support. The family will struggle with many questions. Where did they go wrong? How could they have been so blind? Many religious people will inventory their spiritual processes and values and even declare things like... *'we are good Christian people, attending church regularly'*. Depending on the teaching at their faith or particular denomination, they may even feel they have failed God because they did not have enough faith. Of course thoughts then escalate to, *'What will our friends at church think?'* Sitting under all of this will be a strong sense of failure as a parent.

The 'shell shocked' parent will go through feelings of failure, anger, shame and isolation. While trying to deal with all of these issues they will still be confronted daily with the demands of the addict. At this stage the last thing they need is well meaning advice from well-meaning people with little understanding of addiction and its impact on families. At this stage the family as a whole, and individually, need support. This does not mean that you need a degree in addictions to support these people. It means that you continue the relationship you have always had with these people only with a bit more effort.

Even opening up to friends that one of their children has a drug problem will be a traumatic experience.

The truth is that each member of the family will need to go through their own recovery. For the addict to find true freedom it will mean that the family finds true freedom as well. As the addict has acted out their dysfunctional life they have impacted their family which has in turn developed its own dysfunction. While the addict is working out their recovery the family will need to work out theirs as well. In some of the best recovery program today it is expected that the family is included in the program.

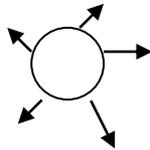
Addiction is a family problem.

Whilst addiction becomes a family problem, this does not mean that I am trying to blame the family for the addict's problems. It simply recognises that addiction does not occur in a vacuum. As the family have lived with the addict and become dysfunctional themselves they have actually become involved in aiding the addiction in the individual. Therefore if the addict is to recover, so must the family. It is no good the addict going through a 12 month residential program and then coming home to the same dysfunctions that they left behind.

They need to come home to a family in better space with each person in the family in control of their own lives.

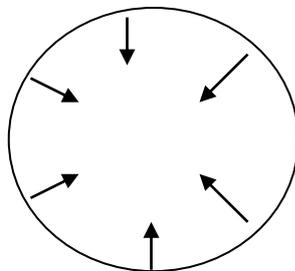
The Effects of Trauma on the family

In an average well balanced person who is pursuing their goals the majority of their indicators are facing outwards.



These people are working or studying towards their future dreams. They are actively involved in a number of relationships with friends and family. They have involvement in other group activities such as playing in a sporting team or being an active part of a community organisation or community of faith and they have a positive expectation of what the future holds. This does not mean that they don't have hurdles to overcome, but when these hurdles appear they are approached with an attitude that they can be dealt with maturely and with the support of those in relationship with them.

When these people are involved in a traumatic situation such as a death in the family, divorce, loss of a job etc. the picture changes. It is as though they had fallen into a ditch that is too deep to climb out of. The arrows that were all pointing outwards now point inwards. This person is now in survival mode. They are overwhelmed with thoughts and emotions that they are not used too. In many cases all they can think about is how the event has impacted on them.



These people are usually helped through this time by the support and encouragement of their family and friends. So while the individuals focus is inwards the focus of those around them is in a much healthier state and actually helping this person to climb out of the ditch, so to speak.

For the family of the drug user every member of the immediate family is in their own individual 'ditch' and thus their own survival mode. All their arrows are pointing inwards and there seems no-one close enough to help them out. Where they would usually be helped by a close family member they find that avenue of help is unavailable - the sense of being alone compounds. Added to this, shame wants to keep the problem hidden from friends, further adding to the sense of aloneness and isolation. A further problem for church going families is that they may have a wrong belief that this sort of thing happening to a good evangelical

family must indicate some sort of failure on their part so there is further encouragement to isolate. It is at this point that friends need to be there. Where you might phone this family once a week, do it twice. If you are having a barbecue at home invite them around. Drop in for a visit, go out for a coffee. Go with them to the football. Whatever the level of your relationship is with this family, step it up a little but don't overwhelm them.

This family will all eventually find their way out of their individual ditches. The timing will differ for each person but they will find their way out and start to move on with their lives. However they will never be the same as they were before. The effects of trauma will be different for us all and how we choose to deal with it - Some become bitter; some become stronger; some re-evaluate their lives and where they are going. For some the trauma can break relationships and for others it will strengthen relationships. There is no guarantee as to how any one individual will respond to trauma. The only thing we do know is that we will never be the same as we were before.

It has been observed that families living with an addiction in their midst could write the script for a soap opera. Many of them feel that this is what they have become in their social communities or communities of faith. They believe themselves to be 'the problem family' and even though they may laugh about the different situations they are confronted with each day, they are embarrassed as well.

What makes a soap opera so addictive is that different characters come and go through the series and those that stay roll from one crisis to another. Each time we turn on Neighbours, Home & Away, Coronation St or any of the other shows that have been running for many years we expect to be confronted with another crisis or disaster. For those of us on the outside we become amazed at what appears to occur to all these people. The family of the addict is in this very situation, except it is real. Each day brings something new, or the fear of it. Each phone call they are wondering what they will be confronted with by the addict. Added to this the way each family member copes with the overall situation brings yet other dimensions of complexity, difficulty or farcical comedy.

The family are living with a loved one who lies to them. In many cases they feel threatened and intimidated by this person. The emotional and relational connection with this loved one makes it harder to make the right decisions about how to deal with each crisis that comes up. As friends we must allow these people the respect to make the right decisions at the time they believe is right.

Some years ago while dealing with a family with an addiction problem, I was making some suggestions to the father about what he could do to bring some changes to the child with the addiction. He listened to me and then said ***"I know what you are saying is correct, but if I do that now it will impact differently on the other family members"***. I realised then that only he could see the picture inside that house. He needed the freedom to implement different rules in the home when he believed the time to be right. I was simply an outside

observer. As time went on he did implement changes, but not because he felt pressured into it, but because he believed the whole family was ready to take it on board.

In some situations I have been involved in over the years families have spoken to me about friends offering them advice and if it was not acted on then these friends distanced themselves from this family. The end result is the family feeling more like failures and with less support. God is gracious enough to respect our decisions in life, surely we can be gracious enough to give others the respect to make decisions for themselves.

Conclusion.

Addiction is not simply a health problem. It is not just a legal problem. It is indeed a very complex problem that affects all of us. It is well past time that the full traumatic impact on the family of the addict was included in programs designed to help people overcome addictions. Some government agencies are already looking at the very clear link between the recovery of the addict and the need for recovery for the family. It is now time for the community and communities of Faith to understand this important area.

If we subscribe to the reality that the family is as much a part of God's plan as we say it is, then we need to seriously look at the flip side of family life. Books and programs on how to **'do family'** are on all our book shelves - how to raise children, how to have a positive relationship with your spouse etc. etc. We now need books and programs to help us understand trauma and the tough times that life throws up.