



The Institute of Family Living

HOW CAN FAMILY MEMBERS AND CHURCHES HELP SOMEONE WHO THEY BELIEVE IS AN ADDICT?

The family and the faith community both need to respond to the addict with a hope for healing. Historically the Church has "walked by on the other side of the road" out of ignorance of the nature of an addiction. Families unwittingly **enabled** the addict by failure to set limits, and by denial and covering up for the addict's behaviour – making excuses, overfunctioning to compensate.

In this century, we've seen the coming together in the concrete application of spiritual principles in the context of community, expressed in the Twelve Steps. AA, and other Twelve Step groups, have become a fellowship of people in recovery – sharing, not preaching, and calling forth the Image of God in one another.

John Bradshaw writes that in his recovery as an alcoholic "the only way out of the shame (was) to embrace it... When I came out of hiding, I discovered people who loved me for being just another stumbling human being." (*John Bradshaw. Our Families, Our Selves: The Shame of Toxic Shame. Psychology Today, July 1989.*)

Some concrete steps families and churches can take to respond to addictions:

1. **Become informed:** read books; visit open AA meetings.
2. **Seek professional help:** clarify you want someone trained in addictions.
3. Be willing to **see yourself as involved** in the recovery process: the whole family needs to be involved in healing, which may begin through an Intervention Process (see box).
4. Be willing to **take action**.
5. Be realistically **hopeful**.

SHOULD ADDICTIONS BE DEFINED AS A MORAL ISSUE?

While some people seem to be able to stop their compulsion (or chemical abuse) cold-turkey when they come to see their behaviour as a moral issue, for others, defining addiction as a moral issue only compounds the cycle of shame. Withdrawal creates a big hole or emptiness which may have precipitated the original numbing behaviour. Thus, if the addictive process is rooted in compulsive acting out from feelings of emptiness, then in the recovery process the addict can learn to fill the emptiness in new ways which nurtures the Self.

Unless a true recovery process is entered into, the addict may go from one addiction to another. For example, a compulsive smoker who stops smoking may develop an eating disorder. An alcoholic who stops drinking may develop a dependency on tranquilizers.

Recovery is only truly possible if there is a rebuilding of the true Self – the Self made in the Image of God. Addictions serve to disassociate the addict from his or her spiritual core. Frequently, the addict has learned the survival strategy in childhood of disconnecting from his or her feelings as a means of adapting to a painful emotional

reality. Hence they become aware of an emptiness that cries out to be filled. Their addiction becomes the process of trying to fill the void.

The recovery process thus becomes a journey of seeking integration between an event, a feeling, and the appropriate expression. It is not uncommon to hear someone in recovery say:

"It took me 2 years in recovery before I could cry, or even know I could cry."

"It took me 2 years to laugh!"



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