

Addiction: It's a Family Affair . . .



By Betsy Richards, Family Nurse Practitioner, and Doug Jackson, Recovery Coach, Certified ARISE Interventionists

When it comes to addiction, parents, spouses, and children are on the front line. They want to believe that the alcoholic/addict has really changed for good. They learn to deny the existence of an alcohol or drug problem. They lie and cover up all the absences, sickness, and hospitalizations and car accidents of the beloved family member. They live in shame and guilt.

"Why can't she just quit? Why does she do this every Christmas, birthday, family vacation . . . We never know what to expect."

Addiction is a family affair because the family suffers too.

RESPONSES TO ADDICTION

Some families just ignore the problem of addiction. But watching a loved one slowly kill themselves with alcohol and drugs is heart wrenching. Sooner or later the alcoholic's behavior makes other people angry. Friends and families begin to feel threatened and used. Ultimately, families may want to strike back, punish the alcoholic/addict, or make them pay.

When people see compulsive and damaging behaviors in friends or family members, they often focus only on the substance use or behaviors as the problem. However, these outward behaviors are actually manifestations of an underlying disease—an illness affecting the brain and the nervous system. Symptoms are recognizable and the prognosis is predictable. The American Medical Association has recognized alcoholism as an illness since 1956. And just this year, the American Society of Addiction Medicine (ASAM) identified addiction as a chronic brain disorder and not simply

a behavioral problem involving too much alcohol, drugs, gambling or sex.

In essence, the brain of the alcoholic/addict has been hijacked by alcohol and drugs. At some point the alcoholic/addict loses the ability to make a choice. Addiction is a chronic brain disease, not just an accumulation of bad behaviors or bad choices. And it is an illness affecting not just the addict, but the entire family.

FAMILY DRAMA

Families are inevitably drawn into the drama of the lives of their alcoholic/addict members. Embarrassment, hurt, and humiliation are familiar feelings. Families find their own ways of relief from the anxiety and hurt: keeping secrets and living lies, drinking more, taking pills, or having affairs.

Some family members try to make the problem go away by taking care of the alcoholic/addict, by paying the bills, bailing them out of jail, contacting attorneys, etc. Sometimes families attempt to control the behavior. But this way of "caring" for the alcoholic is, in reality, a way of enabling the behavior to continue.

WHAT CAN A FAMILY DO?

In the work that we do, the goal is not to "win" against the illness of alcoholism or to be right in a battle of wills. The goal is to find optimal wellness for each individual family member. This takes patience and practice.

"Family" in this case is broadly defined—it can be the family of origin or the family of choice, and might include close friends, colleagues, clergy, and neighbors.

What can a family do to take care of the alcoholic/addict—and the family unit? First, critically important, the family must differentiate the addiction from the behavior. Historically, there has been little help for suffering alcoholics/addicts and their families. Harry L. Haroutunian, MD,

Physician Director of the Betty Ford Center, believes that *"nine out of ten physicians in the U.S. miss the diagnosis of addiction in their patients. Four out of five of these physicians do not believe that addiction is a treatable disease."* What has typically been looked upon for so many years as a form of willful bad behavior, has now found its final and accurate identification as a treatable medical illness."

A common myth is that the alcoholic/addict must "hit bottom" before they are willing to accept help. In fact, professional intervention and help are available to avoid land mines and guide the progress of recovery. The family can engage in a professional family intervention to interrupt the cycle of destruction perpetuated by the alcoholic/addict.

A PROFESSIONAL INTERVENTION

An ARISE intervention is a loving, well-orchestrated family meeting where caring people express their concern about the alcoholic or addict's behavior. It is an invitation to a safe and intentional oppor-

tunity to develop a family plan to interrupt destructive patterns of living or deal constructively with a crisis situation.

Invariably, the alcoholic/addict is only one part of the bigger picture: the family system. If the system remains broken (suffering, enabling, blaming) then the alcoholic/addict, as part of that family system, continues to suffer. Someone must boldly break the cycle. A professional intervention can help move the family to understanding and healing. The goal of the intervention is ultimately to stop the crisis, and get the alcoholic/addict into a safe, medical detox treatment program or into a program of abstinence based recovery.

As professionals in this field, we use the ARISE model of invitational intervention (see box). An intervention is *not* an event. It is a process—because change is a process. Families can recover from addiction; and recovery takes time. **h&h**

Doug Jackson has decades of experience as a pharmacy investigator and as a specialist in the addiction field. Betsy Richards, a Family Nurse Practitioner, has equal experience in many aspects of nursing, from intensive care to hospice care. Their work frequently brought them together, leading to creation of their business, Intervention and Family Recovery, LLC. The company website, www.interventionfamilyrecovery.com, provides a wealth of information about addiction and the ARISE intervention program. More information: call (919) 817-8855.

AN ARISE INTERVENTION

A free ARISE intervention consultation requires only 30 minutes, providing the opportunity to describe "the current problem" in some detail. We ask: "Why did you decide to call today? What happened recently that brought you to this call?"

We complete an intake to get a history of substance abuse, addiction, alcoholism, and/or mental health issues. We also ask about suicide attempts, car accidents, and physical trauma as a result of drug/alcohol use, domestic violence, abuse, divorce, job loss, and altercations with the law. *All of this information is confidential.*

As part of the process, the caller will be asked to select a network of concerned family members (may include friends, co-workers, clergy, significant others) to be involved in the first family meeting. All of the network members, including the addict/alcoholic, will be invited to participate. The first family meeting is by invitation and is conducted in a neutral, comfortable, safe environment. The goal of the family meeting is to address the immediate crisis.

The ARISE interventionist orchestrates this invitational intervention, leads the family meetings, and guides the selection of treatment options. The interventionist is also a resource of information when selecting a treatment center; an appropriate selection is critical to begin a journey of healing and recovery. As professional interventionists, we work with and for our clients and receive no compensation from any treatment center.

At the first family meeting the ARISE interventionist sets the ground rules for the family meeting: No disrespectful behavior or derogatory language. We seek to prevent the disintegration of communication, so prevalent in many families living with alcoholism/addiction. At this meeting, we also review the current problem from the perspective of each member and provide a brief overview of alcoholism/addiction based on genetics and brain chemistry.

With professional guidance, the family quickly understands that it has work to do. It is a difficult journey, requiring fortitude, discipline, and perseverance from the entire family unit. With the ARISE model, the Family Network *must* understand and agree to continue with "the process" for six months.

So begins the process of change. And indeed, a professional ARISE intervention is a process, not an event. We can help. **Call for more information: (919) 817-8855.**