

Addiction in the family

Addiction is a complex issue. It affects every member of the family and can have a lasting impact on their lives. The effect on family members varies from person to person and family to family.

How does an addiction develop?

Addiction is a process rather than an event. In the beginning, people often don't experience any difficulties. As their use continues, they may begin to focus more on the alcohol, drugs or gambling than they do on the other areas of their lives. This process is often influenced by a number of factors, including the culture they live in, life events, their biological makeup and their relationships with family and friends.

Researchers have looked at genetics, environment, and the combination of these two to explain how dependence develops. Right now, it's believed that some people are genetically susceptible to becoming dependent. But this by itself isn't enough to develop an addiction. A person's life circumstances play an important role in determining whether or not a person becomes dependent.

How does an addiction affect the family?

When a family member has a dependency, the whole family usually develops ways of coping with the problems associated with the dependency. Often, there is less communication: the family avoids talking about the issue, avoids expressing emotions, and may keep the addiction secret from the community. Some family members may take on some of the responsibilities abandoned by the addicted person.

While these coping strategies may help the family to operate more smoothly and get along better, they may also allow the dependency to continue. Unfortunately, family members may also use alcohol, drugs or gambling themselves as a way of coping with the problems in their family.

Members of an addicted family often experience loneliness, frustration, fear, anger and shame. They may also feel a sense of hopelessness about the situation. It's important for them to realize that the addiction is not their fault. Often, seeking outside help from a support group or professional counsellor can help them cope with what is going on in their family.

How does an addiction affect the children?

Addiction often creates an unstable family environment. Parents may not effectively discipline their children or provide them with training in basic life skills. Children may feel insecure or unloved. They may also begin to take on adult responsibilities that are not appropriate to their age. Children in families where an addiction is present are more likely to show anti-social behaviour and have problems such as skipping school, aggressiveness, hyperactivity and eating disorders.

Is there any good news?

Living with an addicted person isn't easy, but most children are resilient. This means that they can overcome these difficult circumstances and become strong, healthy adults. They build on their own and others' strengths. For those who may have problems resulting from addiction in the family, help is available.

For more information and to find an addiction services office near you, please call the 24-hour Helpline at 1-866-332-2322.