

Holidays and Families of Addiction

What are These Memories Telling Me?

The holidays are a time of cheer and joyous “remembrances of things past” for so many. But for those whose families have been turned inside out by addiction and its collateral damage to all family members, holidays can bring back painful as well as pleasurable recollections. Seasons that are meant to get us to feel grateful for all we have, can also make us remember what is missing, what we have lost, or all that never got a chance to happen. Sugar plums, in other words, aren’t the only things “dancing in our heads” in this season of cheer and good will.

In the 1960s, when my Dad got treatment, we all thought that once the alcoholic got sober, the rest of us in the family would sort of get better automatically. Normalcy would be restored and we could all go on with our lives as if addiction had never really been there. We weren't total idiots, that's what everyone thought. That's what a lot of people still think, in fact.

If you happen to think this, I will save you a lot of time and heartache. It's not true. It's not true because addiction is not only about addiction, it's about emotional and psychological trauma. People who use drugs and alcohol are often times attempting to numb disturbing emotional and psychological pain that they don't want to feel.

How Addiction Leads to Trauma

Living with addiction often results in cumulative trauma that deeply affects family members. When addicts are using they are, for all intents and purposes, out of their minds. Their behavior mimics that of an variety of psychiatric disorders ranging from manic depression, to full blown psychosis in

which the addict is totally out of touch with reality. To see the father you love turn into a raging, abusive monster, the mother who cooked you your favorite dinner become a raving lunatic, or simply disappear behind a closed door by 9:00 pm or the child you have raised and adored turn into someone you cannot recognize, is nothing short of terrifying. They look at you as if they never loved you, never knew you...as if you are simply in the way of what is really important to them, namely their drug of choice. The out of control and unpredictable nature of these behaviors can make family members feel helpless, enraged, and as if their sense of reality is being turned inside out and upside down. In short, it's traumatizing.

How Trauma Leads to Addiction

Living with the kind of unpredictable and damaging behaviors that surround addiction, often challenges our sense of a normal and predictable world. It undermines our trust and faith in relationships and their ability to nurture and sustain us. It interferes with our ability to communicate our needs and have them heard or to listen to another person communicate theirs. It is, in other words, traumatizing. Over time this "cumulative" trauma (it's never just one time in the addicted home, right?) can engender trauma related symptoms such as depression, anxiety, hypervigilance, low self worth and somatic disturbances (head and body aches, chronic tension and so forth). These symptoms, if they go untreated in family members, can become full blown PTSD. They can lead to all sorts of life, learning, health, psychological and relationship complications and yes, you guessed it, a desire to self medicate. This is how the insidious baton of addiction gets handed down through the generations. Addiction engenders trauma symptoms and trauma symptoms engender addiction. Even if family members do not become alcoholics or drug addicts themselves, they are at increased risk for other forms of self

medicating (food, sex or money, or hybrid combinations of two or three). They are also at increased risk for other types of trauma related symptoms. Who needs to locate an "alcoholic gene"? Understanding the trauma set up makes intergenerational dysfunction or "passing down the pain" clear enough as to make a gene only proof of what we already know.

When the Addict Gets Sober Why Isn't the Whole Family Better?

The addict sobering up is only the first step in healing. Whether that's because the addict was numbing emotional pain from living in a painfilled family or because the family has now become traumatized by living with addiction is more or less a moot point. It's the old chicken and egg story, which came first doesn't matter any more. Everyone in an addicted family system needs to get help and the sooner they get it, the sooner the family can start to heal. If this kind of healing doesn't take place a few things might happen:

The addict may relapse.

The family may break up or polarize.

The sober addict may have to leave the family in order to get and stay sober.

The family may find a new "problem person" or "symptom bearer" to take the focus off the family illness.

Because the addicted family becomes slowly sicker, they may experience one of their members going into recovery up as an assault to their now (or maybe always) dysfunctional equilibrium. They may silently collude in "not changing", in maintaining their sick status quo. Having an "addict" in the family is a great way for the rest of the family to ignore their own state of emotional health. There is always someone to blame the family pain on. Namely, the addict. But when the

addict gets sober, the family is left with their pain which they need to take responsibility for and work through whether it preceded addiction or was a direct result of living with addiction or, more likely, a very uncomfortable combination of both. After all, happy, well adjusted and well related people don't tend to want to drown their pain with drugs and alcohol, something was likely engendering that pain to begin with.

What if the Addict is Divorced, Leaves or Dies; Then Isn't the Problem Over?

Out of sight is unfortunately not out of mind. The unconscious of the family system is shared by all. Family dysfunction is sort of like a rash, it moves around the body of the family and reappears, in another location hot, red.....demanding to be scratched or soothed. But it is still the same virus whether it appears as a bump, series of lines or a fiery patch. The tentacles of trauma reach deep into both the body and the mind, they become part of us. If they remain unconscious they can shape and impact further ways of relating and life choices. They are just as likely to get worse not better on their own.

Recovery Can Grip A Family Too

Getting better is just as easy as getting worse. Healing is also cumulative. The pay offs of recovery are as easily quantified as symptoms of decline. Some "symptoms" of recovery are: enhanced self esteem, renewed energy for life, increased emotional literacy and emotional intelligence, increased emotional sobriety and balance and an ability to make healthier life choices. Awareness is a powerful tool and safeguard. Life will still be challenging, it always is, but with help and awareness, family member's energy will be freed up to meet their own challenges rather than unconsciously

throbbing from festering or turgid wounds from the past that are constantly bleeding into the present and future. Though admitting our need for recovery can feel like walking through a wall, once we walk through it we discover that the wall was a wall of fear, a mental construct, a dark imagining of our own making. On the other side of that wall is a new kind of freedom and self possession, a new lease on life.

The holidays, as well as being a time of remembering, are also a time of renewal and recommitment. This year put recovery at the top of your list. And realize that no matter what your role or position in the family, one person's addiction impacts seven lives at least. Everyone in the family needs recovery from the impact of living with addiction. Make this the year you get yours!

For Further info on recovery and addiction log onto nacoa.org National Association for Children of Alcoholics and The ACoA Trauma Syndrome: The Impact of Childhood Pain on Adult Relationships (Dayton, Health Communications)