

Saving Lives, Saving Families: A Look at Family Intervention

By Jeff Jay and Debra Jay



If you can't help an alcoholic until he wants help, then what will it take to make him want help? The question—*what will it take*—changes the way we think about addiction and changes the way we approach the problem. We don't have to wait for personal tragedy to strike—divorce, job loss, financial ruin, child neglect, jail, cirrhosis, insanity, or death. *Hitting bottom* has a steep price tag. And the alcoholic isn't the only one who pays.

Modern intervention techniques were first developed by Vernon Johnson and the staff of St. Mary's Hospital during the 1970's, and they've been greatly refined and expanded over the years. Structured family interventions are a powerful catalyst for change, raising the alcoholic's bottom to the present moment without the danger and trauma that defines addiction.

Some argue that treatment doesn't work unless the addict spontaneously chooses to get help. If they're "forced in," the reasoning goes, they won't be motivated for change. But a 25-year study by Hazelden compared patients mandated into treatment by the courts with those patients who admitted themselves "on their own." The success rate in treatment was the same for both groups. William Bennett, author and former White House Drug Czar, wrote in the Washington Post: "One clear fact about drug treatment is that success in treatment is often a function of time in treatment. And time in treatment is often a function of coercion—being forced into treatment by a loved one, an employer, or, as is often the case, the legal system."

Families worrying about the harshness of *forcing* loved ones into treatment, often overlook the option of effectively *asking* them to enter treatment by implementing a loving, family intervention. When the role of love takes center stage during an intervention, most families never have to resort to using *tough love*. Love breaks through denial first.

Structure is the key

The key to a successful intervention is planning and preparation. The intervention team is comprised of the most important people in the alcoholic's life, including family members, friends, and colleagues. The team may also include a physician or employer. Planning meetings are used to prepare answers to all the addict's objections, to line up the many details of treatment, and to unify the group. Most importantly, letters are prepared with a specific format and content, which will provide a script for the intervention. By writing everything down in advance, the team can be confident that they will remain in control of the situation, delivering a powerful message to the addicted individual.

There are many details that go into planning and carrying out a successful intervention. Many are listed on the Intervention Checklist (see sidebar). Comprehensive instructions for planning and carrying out an effective intervention are contained in the book *Love First* (published by Hazelden).

Letters provide the script

When an intervention begins, the alcoholic is often surprised to find that he isn't being blamed and condemned. Instead, the power of love is used to break through denial, followed by facts. The loving part of the

letter is often the longest and most detailed section. The alcoholic, feeling anything but lovable, is overwhelmed by a group of his most cherished friends and family telling him in very specific terms, and from the heart, how important he is to each of them.

Bottom line backup

In our professional experience, 85 percent of addicts accept help the day of the intervention. Fifteen percent do not. Families and friends prepare for those who refuse help by answering two questions for themselves on paper: “How have I enabled the disease in the past, and how do I choose to only support recovery in the future?” and “If my loved one chooses to stay in her disease, what do I need to do to begin taking care of myself?”

Intervention letters as therapeutic tools

Intervention letters can be powerfully therapeutic tools during the treatment process. Treatment staff and interventionists should encourage family members to send or deliver the intervention letters to the alcoholic’s primary counselor. The letters can help patients work through anger and denial. Counselors can ask their patients to read the intervention letters during an individual counseling session. Patients can then be given an assignment to read two or three intervention letters during group therapy and ask for feedback. Another assignment is to ask the patient to share her intervention letters with a peer and listen to the peer’s feedback.

Intervention letters help break through denial. When a group of people all write down the symptoms of addiction they have personally witnessed in the patient, it is more difficult for the patient to rationalize, minimize and deny the addiction. Delusional thinking and euphoric recall blocks the addict’s ability to clearly see how addiction is affecting him and the people around him. The intervention letters help the patient see his addiction through other people’s eyes. Counselors and peers can point out discrepancies between the patient’s account of his drug problem and his family’s account reported in the letters.

A powerful and under-utilized tool

Intervention is like CPR for alcoholism. It can break through the natural defenses and denial of the addicted person in a loving way, and help them to accept the help that is readily available. Too many people cling to the myth that an alcoholic must actively want to get sober before the first steps can be taken.

It’s a good thing Bill Wilson didn’t believe that. Dr. Bob adamantly refused to meet with the stockbroker, showing absolutely no willingness to deal with his alcoholism. But Dr. Bob’s wife and their friend Henrietta insisted on the meeting, and that famous intervention led to the birth of Alcoholics Anonymous.

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Jeff Jay and Debra Jay are the authors of “Love First,” and other books. Learn more about their work and find professional interventionists, videos, checklists and more at <http://lovefirst.net/>