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RECOGNIZING THE ADDICT

The Role of the Family

Addiction is a chronic relapsing disease caused by multiple factors. If a person has an alcohol or drug problem, someone must have the courage to address it. Even if the problem cannot be resolved right away, family members must know that something is wrong.

Changes Noticed by the Family

Changes in Physical Appearance

- A dull, vacant look and puffiness in the eyes (Ganja can cause redness of the eyes)
- Heroin and depressant drug abusers have droopy, half-sleepy eyes
- Loss of weight, looking tired, run-down or sickly
- Unsteady movements, slurred and unclear speech

Behavioral Changes

- a) Is withdrawn and does not interact with others as he used to, or spends a lot of time alone
 - Is secretive about his phone calls, visits and belongings
 - Inexplicable mood shifts — seems happy at times and irritable at others

- Eats and sleeps too much or too little and erratically with no discernable pattern

Other Changes

- Lethargic, with little interest in activities that interested him previously
- Has little or no concern for his personal appearance or health
- Poor attendance at school/college/workplace
- Decline in work/academic performance
- Presence of syringes or silver foils or the drug itself
- Increased demands for money

A combination of these signs seen repeatedly over a period of time can point to drug addiction.

Family's Initial Reaction

When the family members notice certain changes in the abuser, they may initially be apprehensive and confused. They may be ambivalent about whether or not to intervene. Some may be afraid of the person, others may be angry. They may wonder,

But the problem is so obvious. Why doesn't he see it?

That is a question that has stumped millions of family members over the years. The answer is that one of the actual symptoms of chemical dependency is a mental process called 'denial'. The person is unable to see that his or her substance abuse is a problem — even while evidence is piling up around him.

The family members' next concern will be

If this person really loved us, wouldn't he stop?

The fact is, unfortunately, love has nothing to do with it. Drugs that cause addiction change the way one's brain works by disrupting the mechanisms through which nerve cells transmit, receive, and process information. After repeated drug use, the affected circuits need more of the drug to stimulate them. The person now craves the very thing that is ruining his life.

Then comes the family's positive response

So what can I do?

They have to talk to the person, formally or informally, in what is called an 'intervention'. Addiction is treatable and there are trained professionals who can help the family members decide how to proceed. Intervention is the most powerful and successful method for helping people accept help. A family intervention can be done with love and respect in a non-confrontational, non-judgmental manner. A family intervention is often the answer, the only answer.

Parents SHOULD NOT

▀▀▀ Talk harshly

You have always been giving me trouble; you never allow me to live in peace.

Instead they should couch their comments in concern.

▀▀▀ Tell the child that he is cheating

All the while we believed that you were studying. Your mother and I have been working very hard so that you will have good education. But you have cheated us thoroughly.

▀▀▀ Indulge in self-pity

Why should this happen only to me? Why should I suffer so much, at this age, when most people are relaxed and contended?

▀▀▀ Blame themselves

My sister warned me not to allow you to stay in the hostel. But I did not listen to her advice. It is all my fault... only my fault.

▀▀▀ Argue while the addict is under the influence

Avoid arguments with the addict when he says he has no problem with drugs. When a parent endlessly argues and tries to prove otherwise the addict will counter argue. Even if his point of view is not agreeable, listen to him with concern and understanding.

▀▀▀ Make promises

While motivating the addict, the parents should not promise him something in return if he accepts help to give up drugs.

If you give up drugs, I will get you a job.

The family should be realistic that the addict's immediate problem is to give up drugs and for this he needs help.

Parents SHOULD

▀▀▀ Be understanding

I am not blaming or condemning you; I understand you have a problem and that you need help.

They must be supportive and hopeful about change.

➤ Treat him with dignity

It is important that the addict should not be labeled as an ‘addict’ or ‘dope-head’. Calling him useless, stubborn, defiant or unchangeable will only make the situation worse. Accept him as a person with dignity and worth; this will help in motivation.

➤ Be firm and supportive

This has affected your studies and health drastically. This cannot continue. You have to take treatment. All of us are here to help you in every possible way.

➤ Be patient

If the addict refuses to take help the first time his parents talk to him, they should not try to force him to take treatment. Parents must be patient and understand that it takes time for him to ask for and accept help. ■