



Can Our Family Ever Recover?

Healing is possible for families too.

Imagine waiting to take care of your own health, relationships, or happiness until someone you love has completely solved a difficult problem. How long might your life remain on hold? What could begin to improve even while their journey is still unfolding?

When substance use has affected your family for a long time, it can begin to shape almost everything. Conversations may revolve around the latest problem. Plans may change because of a crisis. Families can get caught in patterns without realizing it. One parent may try to protect the child while another becomes stricter. Brothers and sisters may feel overlooked. Everyone may be responding to the substance use in different ways.

Family healing does not require everyone to feel the same way or change at the same time. It can begin when one person responds differently. You might communicate more calmly, set a clearer boundary, stop getting pulled into the same argument, make time for another family member, or return to an activity your family once enjoyed. This oftentimes can have a ripple effect on the others too.

It is also important to remember that your family is more than the substance problem. There may still be meals to share, other children or grandchildren to enjoy, birthdays to celebrate, friendships to maintain, hobbies to return to, and ordinary moments that have nothing to do with substance use. Making room for those parts of life does not mean you are ignoring your child. It means substance use does not have to take over every part of your family.

Your child has their own path toward change. You and other family members have your own paths too. Healing may not mean going back to exactly the way things were before, but it can mean building something healthier from where you are now. Just remember that your family does not have to wait until every problem is solved before healing can begin.

Situation

Your family has stopped making many plans because you never know what might happen with your child who is using substances. A family reunion is coming up, and you are considering canceling because your child has recently relapsed.

Instead of

Child: "Are you canceling the reunion because of me?"

You: "We just don't think this is a good time."

Child: "You mean because I'm a mess?"

You: "Well, I'm worried something will happen and ruin the night."

Child: "So you're cancelling because of me? That stinks."

You: “I don’t know what else to do. Everything depends on how you’re doing.”

Child: “It makes me feel bad that you organize your life around how I’m doing. That puts so much pressure on me.”

In this version, the family’s life becomes organized around the substance-use problem. That can increase resentment, guilt, and the sense that no one is allowed to move forward until your child changes. It can also cause your child to feel guilt and shame that your life revolves around how they are doing.

Try this

Child: “Are you still going to the reunion this weekend?”

You: “Yes. We’re going ahead with it.”

Child: “Even though I’m a mess this week?”

You: “Yes. We care about what you’re going through, and this reunion is also important for our family.”

Child: “What if I don’t feel like being there?”

You: “You’re welcome to join us if you can be there safely and respectfully. If not, we’ll understand.”

Child: “So you’d just go anyway without me?”

You: “We love you. And we’re also trying to help our family keep living while we move through this.

In this version, caring about your child does not require putting the entire family on hold. Continuing healthy routines, relationships, and meaningful activities can be part of family healing now—not something you earn only after the substance use is resolved.

Think about it

1. What has your family stopped doing because your child’s substance use is the priority?
2. Consider brain-storming ideas for doing this activity if your child will remain at home (e.g. install cameras, schedule a FaceTime check-in, have a pizza delivered, have a friend or neighbor check in, etc.)
2. What is one healthy part of family life you could begin bringing back now?

References:

Partnership to End Addiction. (2024). *The Partnership Model: A guide for peer parent coaches and families supporting a loved one with substance use challenges*.

Visit our Family Resource Center: [Family Resource Center - Partnership to End Addiction](#).