

Mitzi MacKenzie, M.S.W., explores the importance of treating family systems as a whole in the face of drug use.



Since the September 2012 issue of AFM, we have explored the epidemic of heroin use among teen and young adult populations in our communities; we discussed what warning signs to look for and a brief description of what a successful treatment process may look like for an addict; and we have considered the likelihood that a dual diagnosis may exist. Now it's time to talk about the importance of treating the family systems as a whole for all of the effects of the latter.

Typically, the patient that brings a family into a therapist's office is the only person in the family who gets treatment. The family is left behind to pick up the pieces and wait for their loved one to return "fixed." The reality here is that the family has become as sick as the individual in placement and in as much need of treatment and support.

Through evidence-based practice, we know that the families that experience the healthiest changes are those that all commit to doing the work that is required for a family to heal. These are the recommendations that are supported for a family system to initiate to obtain this goal: Each family member needs to receive the education, insight and awareness of the "what" that is occurring. Each family member needs to be provided a safe environment to process, grieve and inquire. Each individual needs to have the support of a community (for example, Al-Anon, Coda and Smart Recovery groups designed for family members). A family therapist who is skilled in guiding everyone through this process is paramount.

The message here is that once the family member that needs immediate treatment is in place, it is not recommended that everyone else just takes a deep breath and waits for the hospitalized family member to return. Professionals always recommend that someone in treatment for addiction or a mental health issue receives a strong, effective aftercare program. This is the time that family members need to strengthen their own foundation in doing their necessary work so that when the family member that brought them all to treatment returns to the family, there is a healthy, robust environment that will minimize the family decompensating to old behaviors on everyone's part. Healthy family systems are attainable as long as everyone is willing to do the work to make the changes.

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