



National Association of Social Workers

## WHAT TO DO WHEN A LOVED ONE HAS AN ADDICTION PROBLEM

I would like to thank Chairman DiGirolamo, Chairman Cruz and the committee members for allowing me to testify this morning.

My name is Kathleen Birmingham and I am the Program Director at The Lancaster Freedom Center, an outpatient substance use and mental health treatment facility in Lancaster. I am a Registered Nurse, a Licensed Clinical Social Worker and am certified as a co-occurring chemical dependency therapist. Probably most significant of my credentials in my testimony here today is that I am an alcoholic in long term recovery and that I grew up in a family in which both of my parents suffered from alcoholism.

Over the 40+ years that I have been involved in human service field, I have been invested in working with family members and concerned others of clients suffering from substance use disorders. I have been running a weekly group for family members at The Lancaster Freedom Center for many years. When I learned that I would be speaking with you today, I asked the current and past members of Family Group, "What is it that you think they need to hear?" My remarks are a composite of their responses and my experience.

Primarily family members and concerned others need to understand that they are dealing with someone who has a disease, an illness, not a moral failing. It is a very difficult concept for family members and addicts too, I might add, to accept. Most have been experiencing guilt and shame for such a protracted period of time, that telling them that Substance Use Disorders are a disease, like diabetes or cancer is a disease seems way too easy. They need to learn the current medical information that is available regarding neuropathways and dopamine receptor sites and genetics that put the individuals that they love at risk for this devastating illness. A disease, characterized by craving, which causes them to accept the catastrophic consequences of their addictive behaviors and continue to use the drugs despite them. Family members and concerned others need to learn how to stop feeling guilty and giving into the behaviors which encourage the destructive patterns to continue. They come into the group without a clue as to how and why it is imperative that they begin to recognize and change enabling and codependent behaviors on their part. Like the addict in denial that she or he has a problem, family members and concerned others do not realize that they have become very sick in the process. They are angry, defensive and guilt-ridden. It takes time and education for them to begin to accept that Substance Use Disorders impact every member of the family system, and those who care about the well-being of the addicted person.

In addition to education, these individuals need the support of other family members and friends who are going through or have gone through the process and who can empathize with their grieving the loss of how life should have unfolded for them. All family members have expressed how important it is to see that they are not alone in this process. Inviting concerned



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others to attend Alanon Family Groups can be extremely helpful, but they are reluctant to do that if they have not experienced some initial feelings of acceptance and openness from others who have been involved in the process. It is as difficult for Family Members to venture through the doors of an Alanon Meeting as it is for the addict or alcoholic to initially breach the doors of an AA or NA Meeting. In the weekly Family Group, they listen to other parents, spouses or concerned others speak openly about how they came to this situation and how they have dealt with the shame of having a loved one with an addiction problem. Some of the stories speak about addiction to alcohol, some speak about substances such as marijuana, opiates, methamphetamines or other addictive prescription drugs. All of the stories include consequences of loss of control resulting in loss of jobs, education, marriages, children, physical and mental health and a myriad of other costs that the client and concerned others endure while battling this disease. Family members are relieved to hear that they are not unique, that there is a place for them to come and share about what is going on without fear of judgment or condemnation.

The past and present members of the Family Group wanted you to know that they feel strongly that this experience should be made available in every treatment setting. Sadly, it is unusual for an outpatient facility to offer this opportunity. Most residential facilities provide a separate family component, outpatient treatment facilities do not. The Lancaster Freedom Center has always recognized that since everyone in the family suffers when one member has an addiction problem, all family members should be offered the opportunity to receive education and support. At LFC, we do not add an additional cost for this group, because it may present a deterrent. It has been our experience that having family members and friends attend Family Group and becoming a part of the recovery process, helps the client to move forward more successfully in their own sobriety.

In my experience, family members and concerned others all feel some type of guilt. Guilt for not having done something, or for having done something. They feel that it was their responsibility to have prevented this tragedy from happening. They all benefit from hearing repeatedly that they did not cause this problem, they cannot control it and they cannot cure it. The more information they receive, the better they are able to respond in an informed way to the drug induced behaviors of the addict. Treatment helps them to stop reacting with guilt and shame and supports their change to becoming responsive in a more positive manner.

I would like to conclude my remarks by sharing statements from two sets of parents from whom I requested feedback in order to make this presentation today. Both are couples who were involved in Family Group at different times a couple of years ago. I continue to stay in touch with them because they are generous in their willingness to come in and share their "experience strength and hope" with the current group members. They speak openly about their fear, their guilt and their frustration in navigating this rocky period in the journey of their



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lives. They also share their hope because both of their sons are now living successful, productive and sober lives.

Tom and Ellen shared that:

"The Family Counseling Program helped us to look at addiction in a completely different way. It allowed me to give up my anger at my child. One of the best things we learned was that nobody chooses to be an addict. Don't be afraid to make your loved one's life miserable in order to save it. Be willing to take away privileges and endure their anger. This may mean eventually kicking them out of your house and removing financial support. Emotional support is given unconditionally. We got to the point that we were OK with the prospects that he might hate us forever, but if he lived in spite of that, it was worth the risk.

As a family, we had to be willing to sacrifice our own comforts in order to put his health and sobriety first, just as a family would do if their loved one had cancer or diabetes. Carrying through on your ultimatums is a must. Tell your loved one that you expect them to be whole again, not simply that you hope they will stop using."

Tim and Nancy shared:

We are strong advocates of the holistic approach to treatment since the addict's illness pervades every member of the family on myriad levels.

Treating only the addict is akin to concentrating on one tree in a forest fire.

Family members are not equipped to deal with the addict, let alone the interpersonal and conflicted emotions inherent in these situations. Family group sessions were critical for our healing process since they provided not only some education on how we got to this point, but also a crash course in the behavior of substance abusers: what to look for; what not to fall for; where you need to go and how to try and get there.

Our success with our son would not have been possible without the Family Group sessions helping to guide us.

Amateur psychology –especially in dealing with substance abuse—is like an amateur bomb squad, it will, more than likely, blow up in your face. Family Group led by trained professionals is the best approach for the most effective treatment".

Again, thank you for listening to my remarks.