

RESTORING TRUST

by Drew Edwards, EdD

It is no secret that drug or alcohol addiction can damage the body and impair the mind. The good news is that with proper medical treatment, counseling and abstinence, these wounds heal over time. However, the damage that addiction causes to important relationships is enormous and very hard to restore.

For example:

James had been through a treatment program for addiction and was in his third month of sobriety. One night after dinner James put on his coat and announced to his mother, “I’m going to get some cigarettes.” Before the door closed behind him he heard his mother scream, “Not again!” Startled and confused, James hurried back inside to find out what was wrong.

James’ mother was reacting the same way she had reacted a thousand times before when her son “went out for cigarettes.” In her mind, there was no question what this meant—James was going to visit a drug dealer to get high and she wouldn’t see him until 2 a.m.

Even though James was working hard at recovery, and really was just going out for cigarettes, his mother didn’t trust him—and she shouldn’t.

The irony of addictive disease is that those closest to the person with the addiction suffer tremendously. It’s horrifying to watch someone you care about self-destruct. Crippled by fear, anger and overwhelming grief, families and friends either stay helplessly entangled in the addict’s illness, trying to control the uncontrollable, or they separate emotionally. Either way, the relationship may be damaged—sometimes beyond repair.

How can I trust?

Those who have been hurt as a result of addiction have no reason to trust the addicted person. Although early recovery restores hope, re-establishing trust is not so easy. It requires two things:

- First, the addicted person has to stop using drugs or alcohol and change the bad behavior.
- The second factor is time. How **much** time? As long as it takes!

Remember, trust is not the same as love or forgiveness. You can love and forgive someone without trusting. For example, it is one thing to forgive an apologetic jewel thief and quite another thing to leave him alone with your jewelry. Likewise, you can forgive a person recovering from addiction who asks for forgiveness. But it takes time, honesty, good choices and continued sobriety to regain trust.

Forgive

Forgiveness is not a mental exercise. Rather it is a determined change of heart by those who have been hurt. It means not letting resentments steal your peace or rob your future. Forgiveness is not a natural thing to do. It is very hard, but it is the only thing that releases others from their shame and restores the possibility of trust and intimacy.

Take it one brick at a time

Restoring a wounded relationship is like trying to take down a large brick wall separating us from those with whom we were once close. No matter how hard you try, it won't come down all at once. Be patient. Good recovery allows you to remove only a few bricks each day. Over time, there will be a hole in the wall large enough to talk through without shouting. After a while the opening will be large enough to reach a hand through and offer a loving touch. One day, trust is restored and the wall disappears.

OUR EXPERIENCE

The above essay by Dr. Edwards, which was posted on the internet, is an excellent overlay on the actual experience of our family. "Trust" was destroyed the day we discovered our son's drug use and it seemed irreparable when the chronic lying and stealing began. While he was still an adolescent and in his active addiction, we guarded our keys, bought a safe for our valuables, protected our wallets, hid credit and debit cards, checkbooks, and other personal information, and generally secured our home with an intense determination. We were forced to constantly monitor his comings and goings, search his room, dole out money only for specific verifiable expenses, and generally operate a "police state" in our home. We longed for the day when he would be an adult and on his own! The subject of reestablishing trust never entered our minds....we "knew" that it would never again be possible.

Then something amazing happened. When our son was 20, almost seven years ago, we ended the enabling pattern we had been in and began to shed our co-dependent tendencies. We finally recognized that we could no longer endure living the way we were living. We gave our son a choice....begin a genuine recovery with no relapse or go out into the world and seek his own destiny with no further support from us. Plain and simple. We couldn't and wouldn't do this any longer.

With the enabling ended and no clear plan for seeking his own destiny, our son chose the path of recovery. He went into a one-year faith-based rehabilitation program, graduated from it, gave back six months of service on the staff of the organization and has not looked back. For the past six years, he has been substance free, tells the truth at every opportunity, does not steal from us and has put his life on an honorable track. Today, we trust him without reservation.

So, how did the trust get rebuilt? Just like it says in Dr. Edwards' essay. Slowly. Carefully. One brick at a time. And what were the necessary steps in that process? From our experience, here they are:

- The substance abuse ended (critical).
- There have been no relapses.
- We forgave past transgressions.
- There have been no lies told; in fact, mistakes have been admitted to before they were discovered.
- The abusive language ended.
- NOTHING has been missing from our home during the past six years.
- Meaningful two-way communication has been restored.
- There has been a demonstrable positive change in attitude, sense of responsibility and respect for self, family, and community.
- There have been no car accidents in the past six years; his responsible driving now allows us to loan him our cars on occasion.
- We have taken several weekend trips and come home to NO surprises, NO drama, and NO crises.

In short, what happened was RECOVERY. Not just abstinence from substances; not just conformity with rules and societal norms; not just behavior modification, but **true recovery**, with its change of mindset, development of values, spiritual renewal and sense of purpose. The good news is that when true recovery entered the picture, rebuilding trust came naturally, easily and over time!

February 2009

Revised: August 2010