

FEAR

Among all of the emotional upheavals that invade the lives of families affected by substance abuse and addiction, FEAR is probably the most common. In all of my interactions with other families who have been impacted by this curse, it is the one universal feeling that just won't go away. In many cases, FEAR is overpowering, paralyzing normal activity, thought processes, health and life in general. FEAR is an automatic reaction to family member addiction and is as natural as any other reflex. It is very hard to control and seems infinite in its longevity.

In order to better understand FEAR and how to mitigate its influence on our lives, we need to define the difference between "good" fear and "bad" fear...or said another way, "rational" fear and "irrational" fear. "Good," or "rational" fear is characterized by our ability to control, or at least partially control, its contributors, and is absolutely necessary for survival in this life. Fear is one of God's greatest gifts for conditioning us to danger and equipping us to deal with it. We have all heard the fable of the child who was fearless around the hot stove until his hand was burned. The fear of pain created in the child by that experience was a great life lesson and probably prevented much worse injury throughout the rest of his life. "Bad," or "irrational" fear is characterized by our total lack of any kind of control over the situation and though disguised as a real fear, it is not much more than "worry." Dwelling on "bad" fears, also known as pathological worrying is a path to perdition!

In our battle to achieve recovery from the woes of a family member's addiction, there are "good" and "rational" fears that can warn of danger. They need not be paralyzing; on the contrary, they can be useful in helping us devise ways to reduce or eliminate the fear and allow us to move forward. These rational fears need to be responded to differently than "bad" or "irrational" fears. Let's have a look at some representative examples of both, starting with "good" or "rational" fears and some positive and logical responses to them:

Facts that Evoke Appropriate Reaction **(Good Fear)**

- Fear of abuse and/or the premature death of our loved one: Every month, the news of violent assault and death at the hands of drug dealers or other addicts, either through murder or overdose, is enough proof of the legitimacy of this fear. A constructive and appropriate response can be to pro-actively do anything and everything we can to protect our loved one from harm. Sometimes, this will mean assisting in, or at the very least, not impeding our loved one's arrest. They will be safer in confinement than on the street. It may also mean working with the addict to find an in-patient rehabilitation facility that will be safe, educational and the beginning of a process of recovery and the ultimate eradication of this threat. Once the recovery process is underway, it may mean providing "safe haven" in the family home for some period of time.

- Fear of financial ruin: The high cost of rehabilitation, combined with the relative paucity of meaningful insurance coverage, together with the personal property and cash losses typically sustained by the family at the hands of the addicted family member, proves that this is clearly a rational fear. An appropriate response would be to safeguard all valuables, including cash, credit and debit cards, checkbooks, jewelry, electronics, car keys and all other items of value in the home during the period of active addiction. It also may be wise to steer the addicted family member into the “system” where much of the major expense of rehabilitation is covered by government programs. It is also advisable to consult with an attorney to investigate legal ways to protect assets.
- Fear that the family will be irrevocably destroyed: Clearly, the stress that addiction places on the entire family is intense and the potential for the destruction of the family is real. Siblings of an addict may feel alienated due to the attention being given to the addict; parents will feel the stress and may begin to turn on each other; finances may become strained; family life may become a constant turmoil with no end in sight; the temptation to end it by fleeing may become overwhelming for one spouse or the other, or perhaps, even both. One positive response to this fear is to seek support from appropriate resources such as a family support group, psychologist, clergyman, or professional counselor. Recognition of the symptoms of a deteriorating family and qualified support to deal with them can effectively address this fear.
- Fear that addiction will “spread” to other family members: As we have seen numerous times, the potential for substance abuse to claim other family members is real, happens frequently, and exponentially multiplies the misery of everyone involved. This fear can be mitigated by taking serious, formalized steps to embrace prevention through discussion, education, providing real-life examples of the dire consequences of substance abuse and being a good role model for the rest of the family. It can also be addressed by applying what we have learned about denial, enabling, co-dependency, treatment, and consequence when the first signs of “spreading” to others in the family appear on the horizon!

In every example above, it is clear that the fear is justified. It is also clear that families can mitigate these fears by recognizing them for what they are....nature’s way of alerting us to impending danger.... and equipping us with action plans to deal with them. When we analyze these fears and apply appropriate responses, they become less onerous and hence, less debilitating.

Now for a look at “bad” or “irrational” fears.

False Evidence that Appears Real (Bad Fear)

- Fear that our family's reputation is or will be ruined by the circumstances of our loved one's addiction: This is a perfectly understandable fear in light of the societal stigma typically ascribed to the situation. However, when we analyze this fear, to whom are we giving the power to destroy our reputations? The press? People we don't know? Neighbors with whom we don't interact? Society in general? Let's face it...how we are perceived by others is usually a product of how well they know us. People who knew and loved us before the problem became manifest will know and love us while the problem is active, during the recovery process, and into the far distant future. We should never confuse the fear of ruined reputation with the equally unwarranted emotion of "shame." If we were able to hold our heads high before the addiction occurred, then we can do the same after it is discovered. People who think less of us because of a family member's addiction are the ones with the problem, not us.
- Fear for our addicted family member's future: This is a legitimate concern, but since the addict is the **only** one who controls it, and since it truly does not represent "danger," succumbing to it, spending time and energy thinking about it, and suffering anxiety over it are all counter-productive to achieving our **own** recovery. The principle of "letting go" really applies with this fear!
- Fear of our recovering addict's potential for relapse: Here again, we cannot control this possibility, so allowing our own physical and mental health to be adversely impacted by focusing on it takes away from the energy we could be better exerting on positive responses to fears we **do** control. Some believe that relapse is actually an **expected** occurrence in the recovery process and others are terrified of it. Regardless of your position on the subject, it still qualifies as "not in our control."
- Fear of failure: This is one of the most paralyzing fears of all, not only as it relates to helping our addicted family member but in life generally. Failure is a very intimidating event, but fear of failure **must** be confronted. If we **think** we're going to fail, we **will** fail. Success, however we define it, is far more likely to be achieved when we remove this fear from our consciousness and continue to try....always try.... regardless of setbacks encountered along the way. Our son went through outpatient rehab and it didn't work. He went through psychological counseling and that didn't work. He went to in-patient rehabilitation and that didn't work. He tried self-therapy; applying intellectual rationale to his problem, staying sober to avoid consequences and that didn't work, as he relapsed after two years of clean time. And then he went to the 12-month Teen Challenge program, where his life was changed, his values were established and reinforced, and he experienced his first real success in defeating his addiction. That was almost three years ago now. If we had recoiled in fear of failure after his first outpatient experience, we would not be in the enviable position we enjoy today. His potential for recovery was enhanced by a belief that **we** and **he** could indeed succeed.

Fear, then, it seems, can be a helpful force of nature in some circumstances and a serious impediment to progress in others. As with any other emotion, we need to understand where it comes from, whether or not we have control over it by our actions and reactions, and how best to respond in order to move forward and achieve our ultimate goals. As our nation entered World War II, Franklin Roosevelt was quoted as saying, “The only thing we have to fear is fear itself.” As our families confront the war against substance abuse, addiction and turmoil, I would modify President Roosevelt’s wise observation thusly: “The only thing we have to fear is not appropriately responding to our fears.” If we **shrink** from fears of circumstances that involve our ability to mitigate them, or **dwel**l on fears of things over which we have no control, we are headed toward misery and sorrow; conversely, if we respond appropriately to fears of circumstances over which we have significant control and drive out our fears of the uncontrollable, we will be heading down the right road, rocky as it may be from time to time.