

Broken Trust: Rebuilding Relationships in Early Recovery

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 stopping use, 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 alcoholism and was in his third month of sobriety. One night after dinner James put on his coat and announced to his wife, "I'm going to get some cigarettes." Before the door closed behind him he heard his wife scream, "Not again!" Startled and confused, James hurried back inside to find out what was wrong.

James' wife was reacting the same way she had reacted a thousand times before when her husband "went out for cigarettes." In her mind, there was no question what this meant—James was going to a bar to get drunk and she wouldn't see him until 2 a.m.

Even though James was working hard at recovery, and was just going out for cigarettes, his wife 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:

1. First, the addicted person has to stop using drugs or alcohol and change her bad behavior.
2. 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 in a jewelry store. Likewise, you can forgive a person recovering from alcoholism 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 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.

If you need help repairing a relationship that has been hurt by addiction, call the toll-free phone number on this site.

Resource

Forgive and Forget: Healing the Hurts We Don't Deserve by Lewis Smedes. Harper Collins, 1986.

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