

Family Dynamics: An Integrated Systems Approach to Addiction

**Eric Rodriguez, LSW, MSW,
CAADC**

Education Director
Caron Treatment Centers
Wernersville, PA

erodriguez@caron.org

Goals and Objectives

- Understand the role of family systems in the development, maintenance, and treatment of addiction.
- Explore the interconnectedness of family dynamics and addiction, including patterns of communication, roles, and boundaries.
- Identify common family structures and their impact on addiction dynamics, such as enmeshment, disengagement, or dysfunction.
- Analyze the systemic effects of addiction on family members, including emotional, psychological, and relational consequences.
- Develop skills in assessing family functioning and identifying strengths and challenges within the familial unit.
- Discuss strategies for fostering healthy communication, boundaries, and support systems within families affected by addiction.

The Role of the Family System

A Family System

- A Family is an interconnected unit
- One member affects the whole system
- Key principles of Family Systems Theory
 - interdependence, boundaries, roles
- Family can be the group you are born into
- It can be another group you are raised by
- It can be the group you choose as an adult
- It can be your work colleagues



Systems

A **system** is a set of interconnected parts or elements that work together as a whole to achieve a common purpose or function.

Family Influence

- Early childhood experiences and parenting styles
- Family history of substance abuse (genetics & modeling)
- Trauma, abuse, neglect within the family
- Enabling and co-dependency dynamics



Family Dynamics in Treatment

- Codependency and enabling behaviors
- Dysfunctional communication patterns
- Denial and minimizing the problem
- Role adaptation (e.g., "the scapegoat", "the hero", "the lost child")

Family Involvement

Benefits

- It is important to include families in the treatment process
- Family therapy approaches (e.g., Structural, Strategic, Bowenian)
- Benefits: Better outcomes, relapse prevention, improved communication

Challenges

- Resistance from family members
- Dealing with blame and guilt
- Addressing multigenerational issues
- Ensuring individual autonomy within family therapy



“The alcoholic is like a tornado roaring his way through the lives of others. Hearts are broken. Sweet relationships are dead. Affections have been uprooted. Selfish and inconsiderate habits have kept the home in turmoil. We feel a man is unthinking when he says that sobriety is enough. He is like the farmer who came up out of his cyclone cellar to find his home ruined. To his wife, he remarked, "Don't see anything the matter here, Ma. Ain't it grand the wind stopped blowin'? Yes, there is a long period of reconstruction ahead.”

–Alcoholics Anonymous, Pg. 82

Families Traumatized



INTERCONNECTED FAMILY DYNAMICS

Communication

Importance of Communication

- **Challenge**

- **Dysfunctional communication:** secrecy, blame, denial

- **Engage**

- **Impact on addiction:** prevents openness, fosters shame or enabling

- **Model**

- **Healthy communication:** honesty, emotional expression, active listening

“Addiction thrives in secrecy and silence; recovery grows in connection and communication.”

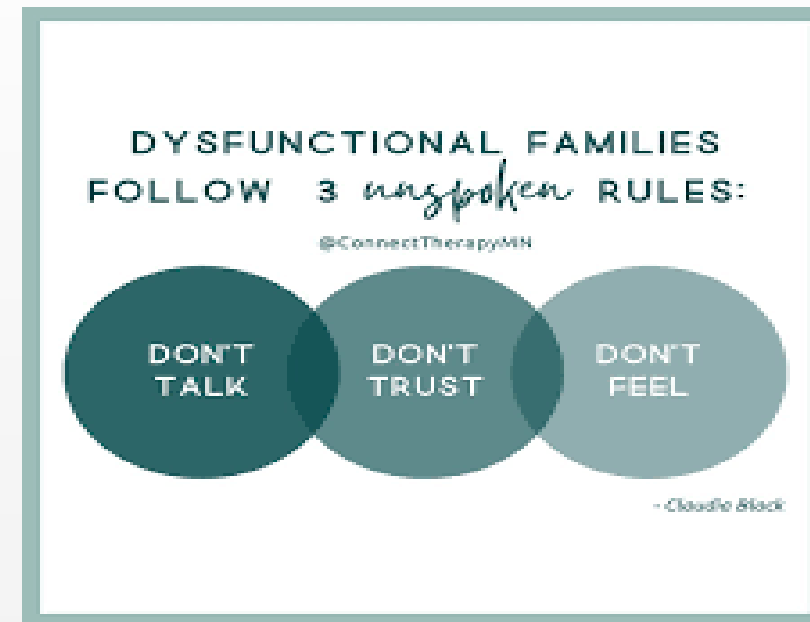
Family Dynamics in Systems with SUD

Family Rules

Do not feel

Do not trust

Do not talk



Modeling Healthy Communication

- Create emotional safety free from judgement and criticism.
- Be Honest, Open-minded, and Willing to be vulnerable (H.O.W.).
- Listen to understand, rather than respond.
- Pause before responding and summarize what you understood.
- Use “I” statements rather than “you,” such as I think, I feel, I need, I will, I want, etc.

Rules



Family Roles in Households with Addiction

The Addict



Central
Focus of
the system

Enabler

- Caretaking
- Makes excuses, covers up
- Responsible to make the family happy
- Shields others from consequences
- Goes to extremes to ensure family secrets are kept



Hero



- Overachiever who needs to be externally validated
- Overly responsible
- Perfectionist, self-sufficient
- Wants to feel in control

Scapegoat

- Acts out, behavior problems in various settings
- Distracts attention away from family's dysfunction
- Rejected and does not fit in with the family



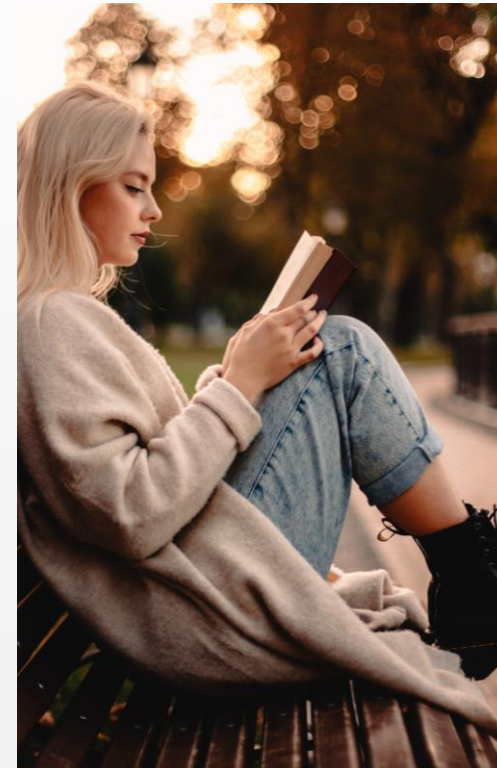
Mascot



- Uses humor as a defense
- Tries to reduce family stress
- Viewed as immature or comedian of the family

Lost Child

- Not drawing attention to themselves
- Quiet
- Isolated and solitary activities
- Escapes into a fantasy world



How Roles Reinforce Addiction

- These roles maintain family stability but **reinforce dysfunction**
- Roles may shift over time or across situations
- Prevent the family from addressing the root issue: addiction

What do you hear/see?

[One Nation Overdosed: How Children Cope With A Parent's Addiction | NBC Nightly News \(youtube.com\)](#)

Boundaries

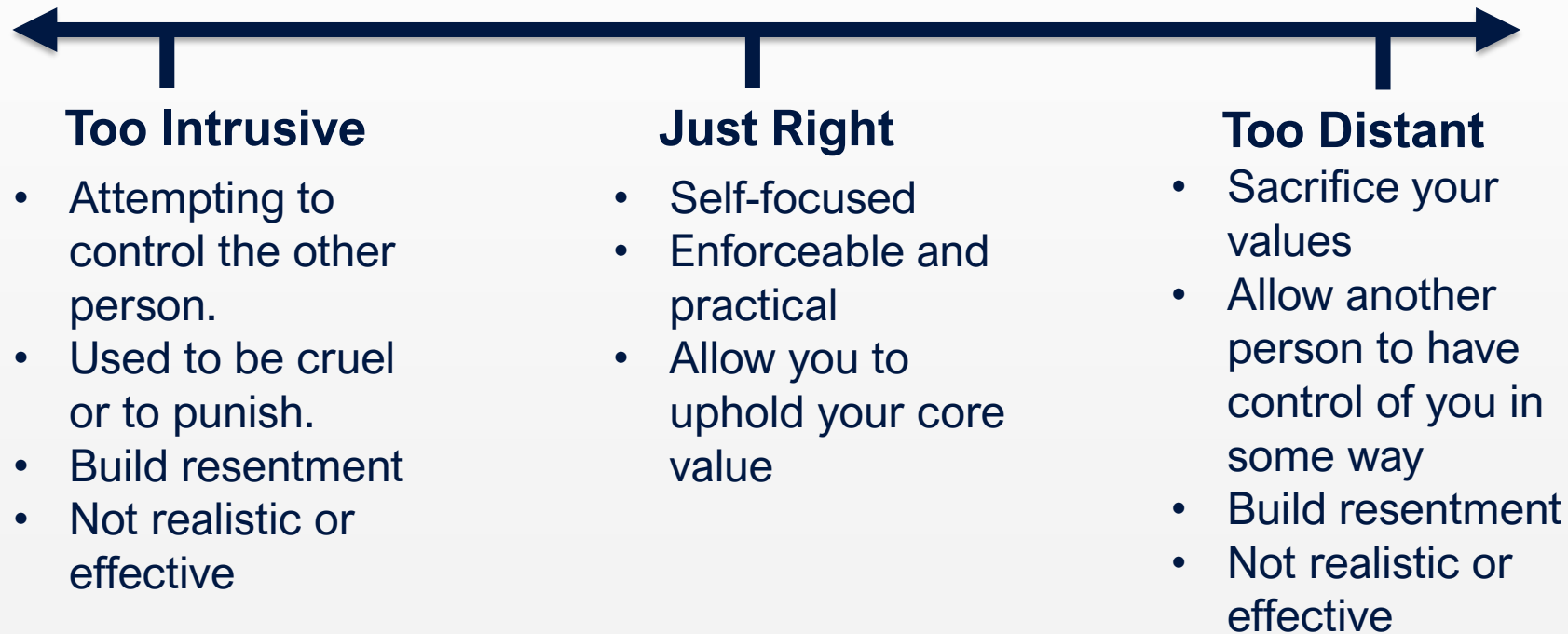
Boundaries

- Personal boundaries are physical and/or emotional limits that people set for themselves to safeguard their overall well-being.
- Healthy boundaries help people define who they are to ensure relationships are safe, supportive, and respectful.
- Unhealthy boundaries are thoughts or behaviors used to manipulate or control relationships to keep people away.

How to Help Others Set Healthy Boundaries

- **Step 1:** Identify your Core Values
 - **Step 2:** Determine what you need to protect your Core Values
 - **Step 3:** Develop a way to honor that need
-
- *It is okay to start small and work up to larger boundaries.*
 - *When we set a boundary out of fear or anger, we rarely uphold them because those feelings are fleeting.*
 - *Do NOT set boundaries during a crisis!*

Boundaries Continuum



“WHEN WE START TAKING CARE OF
OURSELVES, THE DEFICITS FROM OUR PASTS
TRANSFORM INTO ASSETS.”

—MELODY BEATTIE

COMMON FAMILY STRUCTURES IN ADDICTION

Enmeshed Families

- **Definition:** Overly close, boundaries are blurred
- **Impact:** Lack of individual autonomy, over-involvement in each other's lives
- **Connection to addiction:** Pressure to conform, guilt/shame cycles, enabling behaviors



Disengaged Families



- Definition:** Emotionally distant, rigid boundaries
- Impact:** Lack of support, emotional neglect, isolation
- Connection to addiction:**
Individuals may turn to substances for comfort or attention

Dysfunctional Families

- **Definition:** Chronic conflict, poor communication, inconsistent roles
- Often includes **abuse, neglect, or unpredictable caregiving**
- **Impact:** High risk for emotional instability and self-medication via substances



Structure	Boundaries	Emotional Climate	Addiction Risk
Enmeshed	Blurred	Over-involved	High – enabling, guilt
Disengaged	Rigid	Isolated	High – lack of support
Dysfunctional	Inconsistent	Chaotic	High – instability, trauma

Assessing the Family

- Do due diligence in exploring the family system
- Explore relationships
- Look for cues while assessing
- Ask questions
- Listen, listen, listen
- Motivational Interviewing

Families Mirror Emotions and Experiences





SYSTEMIC EFFECTS ON FAMILIES

Integrating Family Systems Theory

Family Systems Theory

Developed primarily by psychiatrist Murray Bowen in the 1950s and 1960s, this theory suggests that individuals cannot be fully understood in isolation from one another, but rather as part of their family unit.



Family Systems

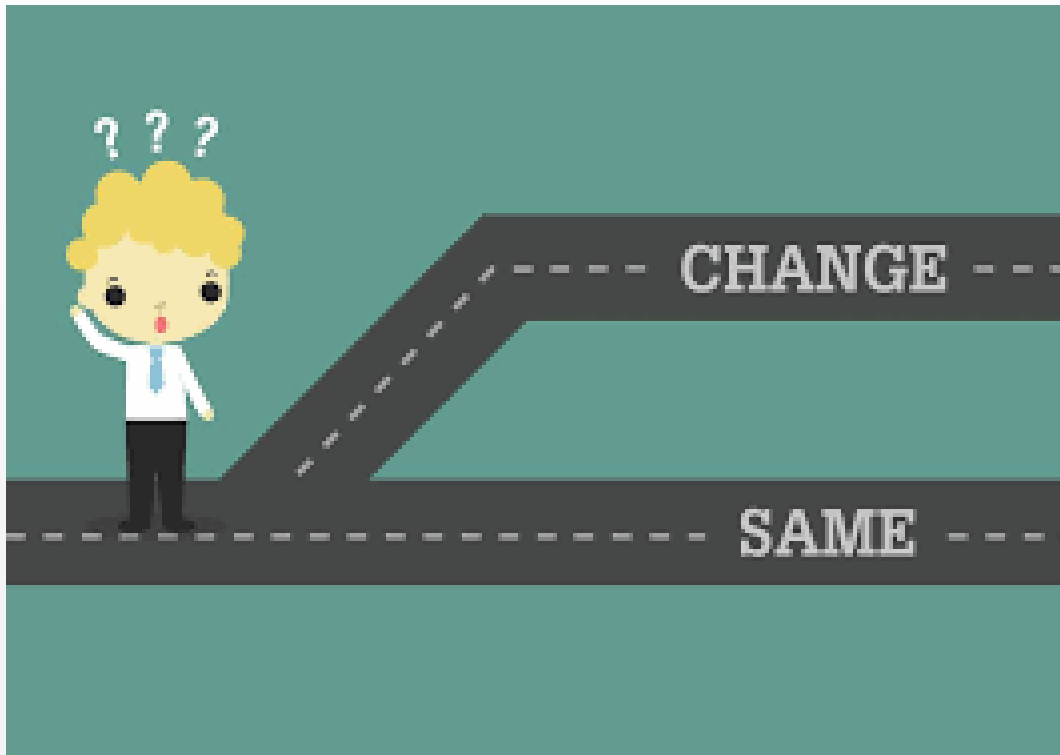


- Interconnected and influenced
- Bidirectional causality
- Boundaries regulate information
- Differentiation
- Triangulation
- Family roles
- Multigenerational transmission

Family Construct

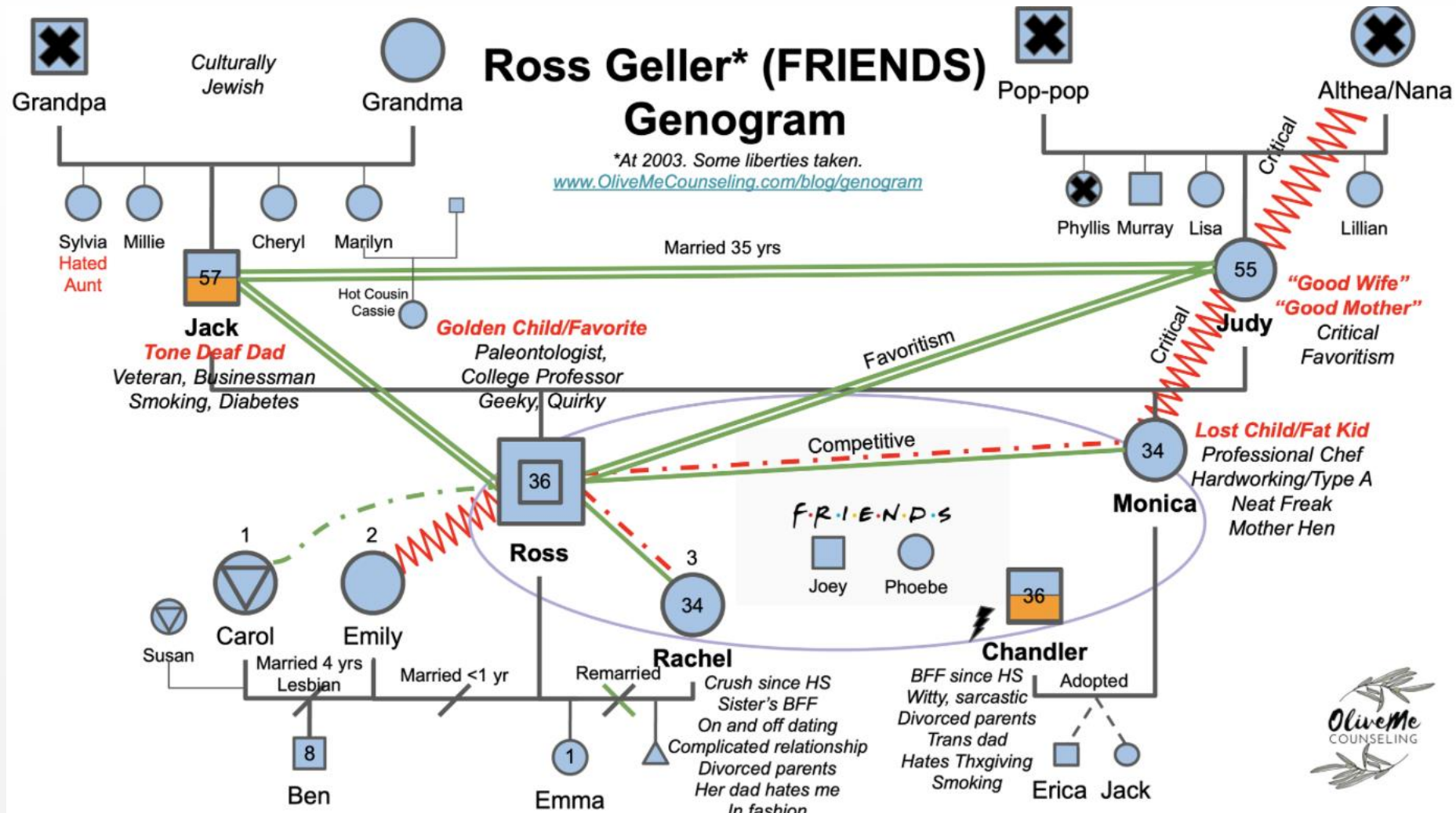
- The term "family construct" typically refers to the organization, dynamics, and relationships within a family unit.
- Family shaping
 - Roles
 - Hiérarchies
 - Communication patterns
 - Values
 - Traditions

Dysfunctional vs Functional



- Not to look at as good or bad
- Healthy vs unhealthy
- Always learning and changing
- Adapting to new and old behaviors
- Relative to other cultural, social and regional influences

Family History



Consequences of Dysfunctional Systems

Emotional

- **Common emotions experienced by family members:**
 - Anxiety, fear, guilt, shame
 - Chronic stress and emotional exhaustion
- **Children** may internalize guilt or feel responsible for the addiction
- **Partners** may experience betrayal, confusion, or helplessness

Psychological

- **Increased risk for:**
 - Depression
 - Anxiety disorders
 - PTSD (especially in cases of trauma, abuse, or chaos)
- Codependency may develop: self-worth tied to the addicted person's behavior
- Constant emotional rollercoaster can lead to **emotional dysregulation**

Consequences of Dysfunctional Systems

Relational

- **Erosion of trust:** broken promises, manipulation, secrecy
- **Role strain:** children “parenting” the parent, partners taking on extra responsibility
- **Communication breakdown:** silence, denial, blame
- **Isolation:** families often withdraw socially due to stigma



ASSESS FAMILY FUNCTIONING AND EDUCATE

Assess

- **Communication:** How are emotions, needs, and problems expressed?
- **Roles:** Are roles clear, flexible, and age-appropriate?
- **Boundaries:** Are they healthy, enmeshed, or disengaged?
- **Emotional climate:** Is the environment nurturing or hostile?
- **Problem-solving and coping:** How does the family handle stress?

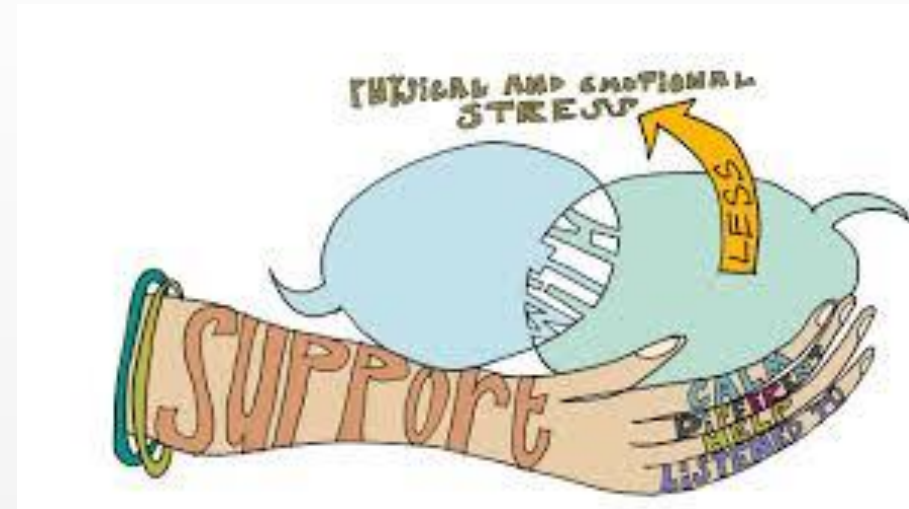


Tools and Techniques

- **Interviews and Observations**
- **Genograms:** Visual family trees that reveal patterns
- **Family Assessment Devices (FADs)**
- **Ecomaps:** Depict family relationships and external influences
- **Therapeutic dialogue:** Engaging families in reflective conversations

Strengths Based Approaches

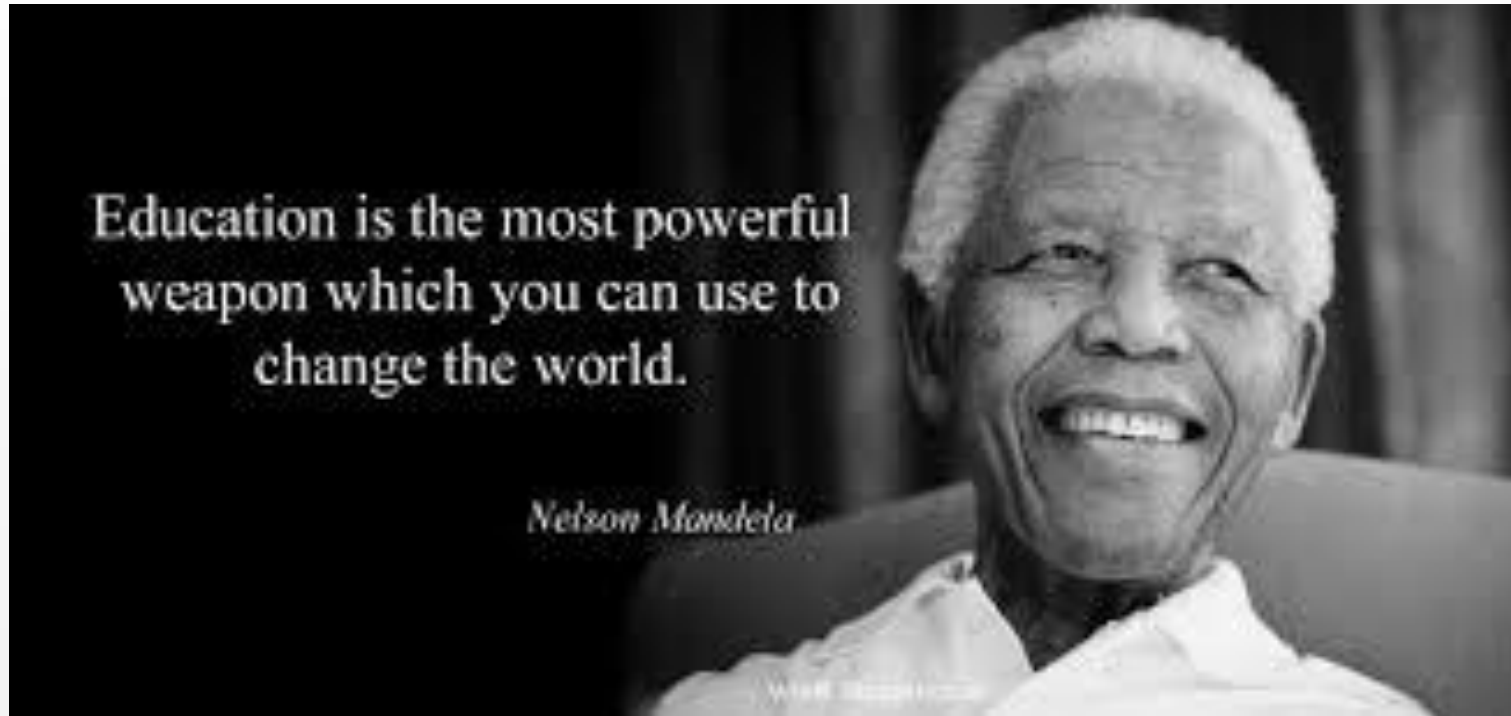
- Assets
- Empowerment
- Solution focused
- Collaborative
- Growth opportunity
- Positive
- Holistic



Challenges and Risks

- Family Systems have complex dynamics
- They can be resistant to change
- Individual vs family goals
- Boundaries
- Emotional Intensity
- Hierarchy and power imbalances
- External influences

Families in Treatment



How Can We Help?

1

Teach the 3
C's.

2

Help assess
contribution.

3

Teach the
AID Rules.

4

Help foster
healthy
boundaries.

The 3 C's

- I did **NOT** cause this.
- I **CANNOT** control this.
- I **CANNOT** cure this.

Help Assess Contribution

Looking at contributions made to the crisis can feel shameful and uncomfortable.

Every person is doing the best they can in a difficult situation.

Assess the ways behaviors have contributed to the crisis.

AID RULES

- **A**llow
- **I**nspire
- **D**emonstrate
- **R**efer
- **U**ntie
- **L**ove
- **E**mbrace
- **S**elf-care

Allow

01

Allow for
consequences
& learning

02

Stop
protecting

03

Stop
shielding

04

Stop bailing
out

05

Stop lying for

Inspire



- Send the message, “You are capable!”
- Encourage
- Be fully present & share in the pain
- Have compassion
- Be positive

Demonstrate



Go to meetings or support groups



Talk about your feelings



Develop and use healthy coping skills



Get support

Refer



ASK PROFESSIONALS OR
OTHERS WHO HAVE BEEN
THROUGH THIS
EXPERIENCE.



READ BOOKS OR LISTEN
TO PODCASTS



GET EDUCATION

Untie

1

Be the focus of
your own
emotional
well-being

2

Gain
independence

3

Focus on your
core values and
beliefs

Love



Love without trying to fix
or heal your loved one.

Learn how to ask for
what you need.

Embrace



Accept that this is your reality.

Embrace the 3 C's: You did not cause this, you cannot control this, and you cannot cure this.

FAMILY SYSTEMS HEALING

What is Family Recovery?

- Examining the System
- Knowing roles in the system
- Altering homeostasis
- Walking own path of recovery
- “Being okay, when other people in the system might not be okay.”

Recognizing Enabling

- Doing something for someone else when they can and should be doing it for themselves.
- Enabling is a natural and normal response to an abnormal situation.
- Enabling can be used to get relief from a terrible situation.
- Enabling is done out of love.

Decoupling

- “Decoupling” refers to parts of a system that no longer influence or depend on each other.
- Emotionally
 - Communication, intimacy, support
- Physically
 - Separation, prioritizing independence
- Functionally
 - Care-giving, decision-making, financial support



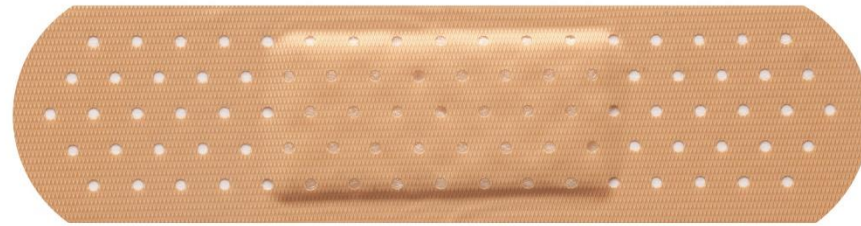
Al-Anon / Nar-Anon



SELF CARE & IMPORTANT REMINDERS

Why is Self-Care Important?

Self-care means taking care of yourself so that you can be healthy, you can be well, you can do your job, you can help and care for others, and you can do all the things you need to for your own life.



We need to practice if we are to teach...

[Official Film Trailer - Portraits of Professional Caregivers: Their Passion. Their Pain. \(youtube.com\)](#)

Things to consider when involving families in Treatment

Supervision



- When involving families in the treatment of substance use, behavioral, or mental health treatment supervision is critical while also operating as much as possible in a multidisciplinary approach to care.



It is important to note that every situation is unique, and family involvement may **not always** be feasible or **appropriate** due to factors such as **family dynamics, history of trauma, or safety concerns**. In such cases, alternative forms of support, such as peer groups or individual therapy, may be more suitable. Ultimately, the decision to involve family members in addiction treatment should be made on a person-by-person basis, considering the individual's preferences and circumstances.

Thank You!

**I appreciate your time and
attention**

 **Email:** erodriguez@caron.org

 **Phone:** 717-208-5764

Let's stay connected!

Citations

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