



Every family member plays a role.

Family members can sometimes take on dysfunctional roles within their households when they're facing a substance use disorder. With acknowledgement, treatment, and time, those of us who may have adopted one of these roles can begin to heal alongside our loved one who has a substance issue. In other words, we can heal as a family unit.

A family role is a pattern of behaviors that a person assumes within a household. Generally originating as a coping mechanism or response to the trauma of a loved one's substance use, it's a person's way of managing the issue emotionally, mentally, and psychologically.

With substance use disorder, there are six common roles that family members may adopt. Although each family is unique in number and individuality, it's common for family members to identify with characteristics of one or more of the following:

The Addicted Person

This is the family member using substances and is the center of the conflict within the family. Signs include frequent and excessive use of a substance, increased isolation, using the substance in higher amounts and more frequently, being unable to reduce or stop the use, concealing or lying about the use, neglecting daily life and important relationships, constant preoccupation with obtaining more of the substance, continuous use despite negative consequences, and withdrawal symptoms.

The Hero

This person often tries to make everything appear on the outside as if they have everything under control. They may also attempt to "fix" the loved one's addiction as well as the family dysfunction caused by it. Signs may include assuming too much responsibility, being self-sufficient, over-achieving, perfectionism, trying to maintain "normal" appearance for the family's sake, being overly stressed out, and hiding their own emotional distress.

The Scapegoat

This individual is known as the "Problem Child" within the household. They respond to the substance use and their own distress by lashing out through acts of defiance. Signs may include defiant behavior, acting out in school, academic decline, change or loss of employment, irritability, increasing hostility and anger, experiencing rejection from other family members, and unintentionally diverting attention away from the person with the substance use disorder.

The Caretaker

This family member goes to great lengths to try to keep the family happy. They're often referred to as the "Enabler." They tend to cover up any mistakes of the person who uses substances. They tend to act like martyrs. They lie for the loved one, downplay the issue, sacrifice their own needs to shield their loved one, support the loved one's dysfunctional behaviors, pay for the substances, deny the seriousness of the problem, and will go to extreme lengths to protect the family secret.

The Mascot

This person is typically a "Class Clown" who sees the problem as serious but will mask or deflect the situation through humor. Other signs may include trying to alleviate the stress of others, being hyperactive, feeling powerless to control or to help, increased anxiety and depression, difficulty managing emotions, and an inability to recognize their own pain.

The Lost Child

The "Lost Child" is the one who often feels left behind. Signs may include feeling neglected, becoming increasingly withdrawn, staying out of the way of others, having difficulty making decisions, struggling to form and maintain positive relationships, increased loneliness, and depression.

Addressing the shift in family dynamics.

When a substance use disorder is introduced into a family system, roles can shift and often become distorted in order to manage the chaos that's overtaking every aspect of life. Love, fear, enabling, and survival are all juggled chaotically, which can lead to the adoption of a role or roles which support, deny, or deflect the presence of substance use.

Families can play a pivotal role in the dynamics of addiction. Patterns of denial, inconsistency, unpredictability, and lack of effective communication start to create an environment where substance use can thrive.

It's helpful to realize that regardless of whether you've adopted one of the family roles mentioned or not, you can create healthier habits and family dynamics by deciding to acknowledge the issues and committing to getting the help necessary to make positive changes. You are not alone in this struggle, and education is key. When we know better, we do better!!

Family therapy provides a safe space to express your feelings, learn healthy coping strategies, and rebuild trust and respect in your family unit. It can help identify and address the roles each person may have adopted in response to the substance use that's impacted the household.

Family therapy can foster healthier interactions and recovery for the whole family. Breaking the cycle of dysfunction and substance use involves recognizing and understanding family roles, seeking help, learning coping mechanisms, and establishing boundaries.

Tips to improve communication and set appropriate boundaries.

Family support is vital for the recovery of a person who struggles with substance use disorder. I would like to offer you some tools and strategies that can enable you to heal and promote healing within your family unit:

* **Actively listen** – Give your full attention to the person who is speaking as it shows respect, understanding, and fosters a line of communication.

* **Express emotions** – Authentically express your feelings and encourage others to do the same as it can promote empathy and connection. Strengthens relationships and promotes understanding.

* **Clarify expectations** – Clearly communicate responsibilities, rules, and boundaries to prevent misunderstandings and conflict from arising.

* **Set clear boundaries** – This ensures the well-being of everyone in the family, shows respect for personal space and privacy, and allows everyone to maintain their individual identities within the family unit.

* **Use "I" Statements** – This can promote problem-solving and avoid escalation of tension.

* **Have regular family meetings** – This can create a safe space for open communication, problem solving, and being heard. This helps the family to stay connected and in touch with what is going on with each other.

* **Know when to seek help** – Sometimes your good intentions simply need the boost of a mental health professional and there is no shame in that!

* **Prioritize self-care** – Do the things that you enjoy!! You are also on a journey of recovery and deserve to recognize your hard work and growth along the way.

Treatment and healing strategies for the entire family.

Treatment for families affected by substance use disorder can provide an opportunity for healing as a family unit. Many treatment facilities offer opportunities for families to actively participate in their loved one's treatment and recovery process.

Some SUD (substance use disorders) recovery family treatment options include family therapy, support groups run by peers or clinicians, educational groups, psychodrama activities, and planning with the team to prevent relapse. These processes can be empowering and healing for all.

If your family has experienced pain and/or divisive consequences from substance use, there are paths towards healing. Any plan will require commitment, compassion, and patience. Building resilience and positively adapting to any form of adversity can be wonderful strategies for seeking and moving forward. Some of the ways to build that resiliency include healing support (whether professionally or in the community), communicating clearly, building a sense of family connectivity, attending work and/or school, adhering to routines, focusing on what you can control and being mindful in all that you do. Learning healthy new coping mechanisms can be helpful in creating a stronger family unit.

If you're seeking assistance with a family member who is struggling with substance use disorder and you're not sure where to turn, please feel free to reach out to us at the McCall Behavioral Health Network. We have programs to help the individual who may be struggling as well as any family members affected by the use of their loved ones. We simply can't state it enough: you are not alone. Recovery is not a destination, but a journey.



McCall's Family Recovery Coach Program is grant funded and provided at no-cost to all participants.

For more information contact:

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Resources

McCall Behavioral Health Network

860.496.2100
mccallbhn.org

McCall's Recovering Together Group

Meets every Wednesday,
5:30PM via Zoom.
For more info, email:
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NAMI CT, Waterbury

Paul Brainerd
860.882.8674 or 860.310.4055
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Sound Community Services

New London
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Clifford Beers Clinic

New Haven
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Community Renewal Team

Hartford and Middletown
Casie DeRosier
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TriCircle, Hope and Support Groups

Hope After Loss Groups
Ana Gopojan
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