

FAMILIES ANONYMOUS and the PROFESSIONAL COMMUNITY



What Is Families Anonymous?

Families Anonymous™ (FA™) is a Twelve Step, self-help, mutual-support fellowship of people whose lives have been affected by the use of mind-altering substances or related behavioral problems of a relative or friend.

Why Is Families Anonymous Needed?

Addiction is a disease with dire physical, mental, emotional and spiritual impacts on the people who suffer from it. And its effects don't stop with just those people. Addiction is, in reality, a *family disease*, with devastating effects on the relatives and friends who watch in despair as their loved ones are consumed by the disease.

The pain and anguish felt by parents, grandparents, spouses, partners, siblings and others are symptoms of *codependency*. Codependency is an imbalanced interpersonal relationship in which one person, such as a parent, allows his or her well-being to depend on the well-being of another person, in this case the addicted loved one.

Codependent people often need special help to regain their own lives, find some peace of mind, let go of over-responsibility, and stop making situations worse by enabling other people's self-destructive behaviors. FA provides that special help.

Staying tuned in to their loved ones while not interfering directly in what they do; encouraging and supporting their loved ones' *positive* choices while not getting caught up in their problems or issues: These are among the critical changes FA members make in themselves as they are attending meetings and working the program.

How Does Families Anonymous Work?

The focus of the FA program is on the family, not on the user (for whom many other recovery programs are available). FA groups are open to anyone concerned about another person's current, former or suspected use of drugs or alcohol. Groups hold meetings (face-to-face, online, or by phone), usually weekly, in locations throughout the United States and in more than a dozen other countries. No dues or fees are required for membership. Anonymity is stressed in all aspects of the program for the protection of members and their loved ones; for this reason, first names only are used.

By following FA's Twelve Step program of recovery—which includes basic readings, discussion of FA-approved literature, and sharing of experiences—members find a way to put their lives back together and achieve some sense of serenity. Over time, the changes they make in themselves, and the new ways they interact within their families, can exert a positive impact on their family dynamics, most likely benefitting even their addicted loved ones.

How Can Families Anonymous and Professionals Cooperate?

People suffering the effects of a loved one's addiction often turn to the professionals in their lives for guidance about what to do or where to get help.

Countless professionals from all walks of life have made referrals to FA throughout the half century since its inception.

Many also turn to FA for their own personal healing. They attend FA meetings regularly as lay members, leaving their jobs outside the meeting room door. In FA, everyone is equal and anonymous. By maintaining each other's anonymity (for example by not divulging last names or other personal details, such as where members reside or what they do for a living), FA groups are able to keep "principles above personalities."

Some professionals go even further, by starting additional FA groups. Once a group is up-and-running, the professional steps aside so that *all* the group's members can have a role in managing its meetings in accordance with FA's Twelve Traditions, which require autonomy, anonymity, rotation of leaders, and no other affiliation.

Educators

Why do some students get into trouble in school ... have attendance problems ... display aberrant behaviors ... have difficulty “fitting in”? Among the common answers in today’s society is a young person’s substance abuse and the related behaviors that arise from it.

When such problems come to the attention of school counselors, teachers, and administrators, many school districts have protocols in place whereby they can make families aware of *student-focused* programs and can provide referrals to those programs. But what about the rest of the family? Addiction does not affect just the individual student; it also affects his or her entire family. And the family needs help as much as the student does.

Perhaps you have already referred some of your students’ family members to FA. If so, you have seen for yourself the benefits of the FA program. Within the safety of FA meetings, people can address their own roles in their families, work on changing their counterproductive attitudes and actions into more-productive ones, and learn new coping skills. In this way they are helping themselves while also potentially improving their relationships with their children and others.

Health Care Providers

As a health care provider—whether in a hospital setting, a treatment center, or an individual practice—you have undoubtedly witnessed, firsthand, that truly successful and long-lasting results are more likely if two things happen: 1) chemically dependent persons are able to halt the progression of their illness (which is best done with professional help) *and* 2) their family members and friends find help for themselves.

It takes time for addicts to “face up to their demons” and succeed in changing their long-standing, self-destructive behaviors. It takes time, as well, for their codependent relatives and friends to do the same.

Addiction treatment programs and facilities are great resources for the person who has the disease. But they cannot provide that person’s family with intensive, ongoing support. FA can fill this need and play a vital role in the recovery process. Your referral of a concerned family member to FA can be a truly lifesaving intervention.

Law Enforcement Personnel

As a member of the law enforcement community (a police officer, a probation officer, an attorney, or a judge, for example), you are probably in all-too-frequent contact with people who abuse drugs or alcohol.

Have you ever felt particularly challenged by having to deal with the family—especially the parents—of a young person accused or suspected of involvement in a crime where drugs or alcohol may have played a role? Have you ever been a target of hostility from parents who are feeling completely overwhelmed by grief, denial and frustration over their loved one's seemingly insurmountable behavioral problems? Have you ever felt shocked when parents show disrespect for a legal system that *you* believe is fair, but that *they* fear will deal harshly, negatively and in a biased manner with their substance-abusing loved one?

If so, we encourage you, as a law enforcement professional, to consider referring them to FA. This free fellowship can provide them with tools to relieve their anxieties, to be more accepting of reality, and to deal more rationally with the legal problems that so often beset families of substance abusers.

Community Leaders

Many cities have leaders who plan public forums or town hall meetings to address substance abuse in their communities. Are you one of these leaders?

If so, you are well aware how beneficial such events can be for communicating information. These safe, nonthreatening events are ideal for reaching out to people who are confronting a loved one's addiction and who might be finding it awkward and embarrassing to voice their questions and concerns publicly, lest someone ask them *Why?* Even if addiction is pervasive within their neighborhoods and wreaking havoc in their families, their first inclinations may be to stay silent and withdraw socially, so as to hide their feelings of hopelessness, shame and guilt.

When you reach out through your forums and meetings, please consider including FA members as speakers and panelists. Invite them to tell their stories about how FA has helped them and their families. They can explain how the FA program has put them on a recovery path toward acceptance and serenity—and how it can do the same for other suffering families. FA members know firsthand about substance abuse and can share practical information, much-needed comfort, and hope.

Librarians

Libraries were created, first and foremost, to be places for reading and learning. Today they are so much more than that: They are gathering spots where people from all parts of the community come together to avail themselves of the various services and programs being offered there.

As you scan the often-neutral expressions of the people coming into your library, do you sometimes wonder how many are close to being overwhelmed by drug-related chaos running rampant in their families? Can you identify which of them may be wrestling inwardly with guilt, anger, frustration, anguish, and other negative emotions perhaps arising from their codependent relationships with their addicted loved ones?

Unless they have confided in you, your answer to these questions is probably *No*. So, what can you do to help? One way is simply to display announcements of FA meetings taking place in your community. Another is to offer, and even highlight, FA literature, so that suffering families and friends can start finding a path toward healing and hope.

Clergy

As you counsel the parents, other relatives, and friends of people suffering from substance abuse, you most assuredly encounter their questions of doubt, denial, low self-worth, and faltering religious beliefs. We invite you to let FA help you help them.

FA is a *spiritual* program. Its message is one of self-help facilitated by group interaction. FA meetings are open to everyone, regardless of religious belief or affiliation (or the lack of either).

In FA there is a common thread that binds all its members: everyone is dealing with similar problems of substance abuse in their families. Members understand each other's suffering. In the safe, nonjudgmental space of their meetings, they can share their experiences (challenges, hopes, setbacks, successes) in an open and honest way: learning from each other; gaining support from each other; taking from the meeting what they can use and leaving the rest behind.

Members learn to differentiate between what they *can* change (themselves) and what they *cannot* change (other people). They let go of the past, stop obsessing over the future, and focus on living today. They learn better ways to handle problems caused by their substance-abusing loved ones, such as listening and *responding* rather than tuning out and simply *reacting*. They identify and resolve their negative self-perceptions and become more serene, peaceful, and accepting of reality. This, in turn, for many people, can rekindle a dormant interest in their religious beliefs, despite the persistence of unsolved problems.

Employers

Do you sometimes notice behavioral changes in your employees? Perhaps they seem unduly fatigued, preoccupied, impatient. Perhaps they are missing work more often than usual.

When people are in pain because a loved one is involved with drugs or alcohol, their suffering often finds its way into the workplace: Their attitudes can become problematic. Their productivity can decline. The quality of their interactions with their coworkers can deteriorate.

In such circumstances, one of the best interventions you can offer your troubled employees is a referral to FA. The referral can be done in the context of an employee-assistance program (if one exists in your company) or simply in the form of a heart-to-heart conversation.

By joining an FA group and attending FA meetings on a regular basis, your employees can begin recovering from the agonies of dealing with a loved one's substance abuse. With guidance and support from their fellow FA members, they can learn ways to manage their family problems more effectively. As that part of their life improves, they can regain their prior productivity and, using the positive attitudes brought about in this Twelve Step fellowship, strive once more to reach their full potential.

Our Invitation to You

We invite you to learn more about Families Anonymous by visiting our website or by contacting our World Service Office (see information below). Find meetings that exist in your community and beyond, and get help in starting new ones. Discover FA's wealth of recovery literature, some of it available for free download. Look through recent and past issues of FA's newsletter, *Serenity Messenger* (previously *The Twelve Step Rag*), and read testimonials and personal stories written by FA members who tell how the program has changed their lives and put them on a path toward recovery and serenity.

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