

siblings

Dear Denise:

My sister and I are siblings of a brother suffering from substance use disorder? Does anyone care about us?

Margie

Dear Margie:

I definitely get the frustration in your succinct question. I know why it is there and I will try to address this with guidelines for those who love you.

When family members discover that one of their loved ones is suffering from substance use disorder it is a shock.. They immediately want to do something and “save” this person. Focus is totally on this person and the goal of rescuing. As the addiction evolves, the family members become more obsessed. I know. I was one of them. It is as if there is no one or nothing else in the world.

When it is a child (even an adult child) it seems to be instinct to act in this manner. It is very much the same as a family who has a child with a disability or illness. In this instance the focus would be on the disabled or ill child.

In both of the above cases we adults seem to feel that we must protect the weaker and “needy” and the others can take care of themselves. This, of course, is a bad assumption. Everyone needs attention, love, and to feel that people care about them. When the issue is substance use disorder (addiction), there is a big stigma attached and many people resent the attention even more because they feel these people made bad choices and why are we, who made good choices, work hard, and are not needy, getting “punished” for this.

Siblings are put into a very unhealthy position. They watch as their parents suffer from fear, anxiety, anger, frustration, and sadness. They, too, love this person and have feelings of sadness and frustration as well as fear and anxiety. But often there is no one emotionally available to comfort them because they are busy being obsessed with the person using and abusing the substance. Eventually their feelings turn to anger and frustration.

I have seen this family dynamic many times over my years working with families. It is difficult to tell parents to be aware of what is happening in the family with everyone. They do understand that they need to be a part of the whole family but often they end up just being physically there without being emotionally there. Addiction robs us and not just the one using.

It is almost impossible to live through this without blame coming into the picture. If a sibling voices thoughts about being ignored and not being a part of the parents world sometimes the parent will blame them for being insensitive and not loving their sibling. The siblings often feel that the suffering loved one is ruining the family. And, again, sometimes the neglected ones begin to feel that maybe being good, making the right choices, and being self sufficient is not so good for them. Maybe the only way to get attention and be loved is not to be so good and to make some bad choices. This is dangerous.

It is important for families to talk about how they feel without judgement. Parents can't expect the other siblings to give up their own lives, family comfort and time, and be as

emotionally focused on their loved one. Even the parents are not doing themselves or the rest of the family any favors by being absent in all ways that count. I know from experience that taking care of ourselves, our families, and trying to help the suffering loved ones is a very big task. It is really the only healthy thing to do. It is not selfish. It is self care.

Margie, please think about these two suggestions seriously.

Again, families must talk to each other about how they feel and do it without judgement.

Communication is so important.

And, everyone in the family, including parents, must consciously take time to take care of themselves, spend positive quality time with the healthy members of the family, and take time to look at the good things in their lives. And, Yes, we care about the siblings!!

Regards,
Denise Krochta