

# Affected Family Members

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Imagine playing a game in which each turn involves solving both a new problem and all the previous turns' unsolved problems. Your attempts to implement strategies to help you cope and solve the problems are interrupted by the other players' demands and needs. At any time, you may have to cope with a monsoon, quicksand or a stampede. Moreover, once you've started playing the game, you must continue until it is over, but you don't know how long it will last. How long do you think you could play this game before it overwhelmed, traumatized, or depleted you?

This is the kind of stress families endure who have members with chronic mental illness, substance abuse, porn addiction, or serious medical or financial stressors. Fortunately, there are many effective strategies that can help those who are currently being affected, and those who were affected by childhood experiences. Boundary setting and calming the nervous system will be addressed in this article as ways to change relationship patterns and heal the brain and body.

## Boundary Setting

Cloud and Townsend (*Boundaries*, 1992) write about the importance of setting healthy boundaries with others. These include:

- Honesty and directness:
  - Discuss issues with the *involved* person present to solve the problem.
  - Tell the truth in a respectful way when resentments and anger surface.
- Responsibility:
  - Do for others what they *cannot* do for themselves.
  - Take responsibility for your feelings, behaviors, and needs, and allow others to respond to theirs.
  - Decide what you can and cannot do, considering both your needs as well as the other person's needs to avoid resentments.
  - Practice saying "no" to people who will respect your boundaries before attempting to do so with those who will not honor your boundary.
- Consequences:
  - Set limits regarding what is acceptable and unacceptable treatment of you.
  - Identify and enforce appropriate consequences when others do not respect your personal rules.
- Conflict:
  - State the truth as you see it instead of avoiding disagreements.
  - Stay calm during your interactions to help solve the problem and improve your self-confidence.
  - Choose to *respond* to conflict, not *react*.
  - Remove yourself from the conflict long enough to gain control of your emotions if necessary.
- Self-awareness:
  - Identify what you need to do differently in your interactions instead of expecting the other person to change.
  - Identify what need of yours is unmet.

-Take steps to get that need met.

### **Calming the Nervous System**

Dr. Tian Dayton (*The Set Up: Living with Addiction*), in her online article, describes what recovery involves for affected family members. Essentially, healing involves rewiring the brain to learn how to tolerate emotional and mental pain. In short, strategies to heal the nervous system include:

- Managing physiological symptoms (slowing heart rate, breathing, etc.)
- Spending time with healthy and supportive people
- Improving nutrition.
- Getting adequate rest.
- Making time for relaxation.
- Incorporating self-soothing strategies such as yoga and massage.
- Practicing breathing exercises.
- Working on past and present family issues.

The ability to set appropriate boundaries and learning how to calm the nervous system improves when surrounded by healthy and supportive individuals. Seek out a healing environment, such as a support or therapeutic group, if this is not available to you in your immediate circle.

*Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity! - Psalm 133:1*

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