



## 4 HARM MINIMISATION TO THE FAMILY

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The family provides the very foundation of life in most societies. Whether in its nuclear version or the extended concept it is an integral part of all communities. Ideally, the family should be a close-knit and supportive unit. A member of the family taking drugs can seriously jeopardise this role.

The whole family will live with and experience the drug problems of one of its members. Roles and duties are likely to be neglected, relationships will be impaired and people's respect for their own family is likely to be damaged. Many family members will feel ashamed at what they see as the disgrace that has fallen on their family. Many of them are likely to blame themselves and ask where they went wrong. The family is harmed by the experience of drug abuse, be it from illicit drugs, alcohol or prescription drugs.

One of the most telling observations of families that include a drug user is that family members can take on the behaviour of the user even though they themselves are not using the drug. They may lie about an illness in order to avoid going to work, to school or socialising. Performance at the work place or in school is likely to be impaired as most of the attention is on the abuser. Many experience stress or stress-related illnesses because of worry and lack of sleep. At times even appetite can be affected. The influence of drug use touches every member of the family unit.

The family can become the centre of increasingly destructive behaviour. Nasty verbal exchanges between the user and the rest of the family are likely to be a regular occurrence. Physical abuse can occur frequently and, at times, even sexual abuse can come into play. Naturally, these incidents have a dramatic effect on family life.

Children are likely to be the most affected. Though there is an innocence in childhood, they will know that something is wrong. This is likely to result in major confusion and misunderstanding. They are likely to feel fear, particularly if they are the subjects of physical and sexual abuse. This has a dramatic effect on their individual development.

One of the most effective ways of minimising harm to the family is to involve them in self-help groups. These are groups of people who

find themselves in a similar position. Their sons and daughters or husbands and wives, perhaps even parents, are using drugs in a hazardous or harmful way. The sameness of their position, the common issues and problems they share, the recognition that they are not the only ones in a particular situation, can be of great comfort and help.

The group provides family members with an opportunity to talk through their particular problems with people who will understand. They are able to air their feelings and concerns. Many groups take turns to focus on one or two situations per meeting. Some groups share people's experience of their worst moments, funniest moments in hindsight, and so on. All of the groups are designed to assist people to develop their own answers to their own difficulties.

The suggestions for these answers will come from other group members. The common experience that they share is likely to provide an insight that can suggest something practical and reasonable that someone can do about their situation.

Self-help groups often have two less tangible outcomes. First, the family realises that they are not alone. Second, family members come to accept that they are not responsible for the user's behaviour. These are important breakthroughs.

Of course, self-help groups are not the only approach. To minimise harm some people become involved in:

- family therapy sessions that use professional therapists who seek to assist the family to understand what is happening to them, accept the reality of that situation and explore what they can do;
- stress management sessions that seek to equip the family with the skills and knowledge necessary to manage the inevitable tensions that will exist; and
- individual therapy for particular family members effected by the drug use of another family member.

Through self-help groups, family therapy, stress management and individual therapy families can minimise the harm done to them by the presence of a family member with a drug problem.