

From Enabling To Acceptance

She regularly attended Family Group at Higher Ground to support her brother, and with each session came a different gift of understanding. A family member's anonymous story.

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A mother would talk and I would hear my own mother; a sibling would talk and I could recognise one of my siblings or myself. Every story was different, some wrenchingly so, but there was also a same-ness: common themes that I was able, in some way, to relate back to my own family.

While my brother was at Higher Ground, I regularly attended Family Group sessions on Wednesday evenings. My initial anxiety diminished over time but never entirely disappeared, and was accompanied by a whole raft of other emotions. Each session focussed on a different person or issue and each time, with the sharing of stories, came a different gift of understanding.

As residents shared their lives, the group leaders guided and encouraged, directing them at times to stop, to breathe, stay in the moment with

feelings that were often very difficult and powerful. I watched in admiration and gratitude as they lead people to emotionally new places, supporting them while they began the process of releasing the pain associated with memory.

Much of my anxiety around attending Family Group went back to my family of origin. (brought up in story from below) What I find confusing is that in the family I came from, we were all looked after materially, no one was physically abused, I knew we were loved even though it wasn't voiced, although not perhaps love as I would try to express it in my own family now. This is something I have address and we tell each other we are loved.

We all felt that family was important – perhaps not so much our individual part in it, there was more a group identity. I was the oldest of

10 children, and aged 15 when the youngest was born. We were close together in age as there were no twins.

As the eldest my position was more favourable. I probably got more individual attention and left the family base to start my own family at 19, recreating some of the patterns I had learned. The youngest siblings didn't have it so bad, but in the middle there were three brothers who were treated as one entity. Part of it was the logistics of a big family with a mother who wanted to have a life of her own. Different people would come in and look after us so she could get away with my father or do things for herself.

We grew up on a farm, in what could be described in hindsight as a “Lord of the Flies” situation, particular for those of my brothers in the middle of the family. There was some bullying, the eldest had the say, it was

hierarchical, socially isolated until we could drive and then you had to go where the driver wanted to go.

I guess what we never discussed, and I didn't realise this at the time, was feelings. We talked a lot about things, had family discussions, learned to rationalise, but no one was asked how they felt. We learnt feelings made you vulnerable. We were a reactive family, in the habit of using emotional explosions to negate the need to stay with uncomfortable feelings. I grew up feeling defensive with a need to justify and avoid conflict. If there was a problem I learned to totally focus on a solution rather than acknowledge the feelings.

A lot of what I discovered at Higher Ground was as I listened while my brother tried to access his feelings. Many of the insights I am talking about came from him.

My brother says he had been given everything materially but never felt loved. Being valued meant towing the line, thinking of the bigger picture. Having parents who didn't have time meant feelings were pummelled down. Being at Higher Ground and hearing my brother talk, I was able to think about the way I related to my own children and the unhealthy patterns I had just brought straight into my own family. So it's been at times painful but a powerful way to learn.

We have another brother who was also a resident at Higher Ground but he probably left at the stage when he was being asked to face all this. His idea was he had a perfect family. If that belief started to fall apart, then everything did, and I imagine he just couldn't cope with that. He hasn't addressed anything, has cut himself off from us and is still in some form of addiction.

I feel like we're just scratching the surface. It's confusing but I am starting to understand. My brother pointed out that when our father drank he became happy and affectionate and

that was when he would hug us or show physical affection. He was a very hard worker, a professional who also ran a farm, was very busy and had a lot of demands on his time. He was a larger-than-life figure, and for my brothers it was almost an impossible act to follow.

Being in the spotlight of his approval was an incredibly

“Now we know how to talk, to listen and not interrupt or tell each other you've got it wrong.”

wonderful place to be. On the other hand, he was very authoritarian and I was incredibly scared of his disapproval because it was very vocal. He was highly rational, articulate and intelligent so it seemed that if he came to a conclusion then it had to be right. We were Catholic so I felt I was judging myself anyway for confession, often weekly. That's where some of my anxiety also comes from, and then also the shame of disappointing my father. I feel disloyal even talking about it. My daughter recently asked my brother, is it difficult to forgive your parents? And he said, “there's nothing to forgive, they didn't do anything wrong. They loved us and showed it the only way they knew how.”

I went to Higher Ground to support

my brother, but knowing there were aspects of my own life that were not ideal, I guess I went wondering “maybe this will help me too?” and it definitely did. As soon as I read the handouts from Higher Ground, bells started ringing.

Enabling was big in our family: mopping up after people; solving their problems; coming up with the answer; lending money to get someone back on their feet. At Family Group I would hear how other families behaved in similar ways. I became aware of my tendency to jump in and save; a tendency to take on the emotions of others or some responsibility for them

Since Family Group, I have only attended one AI-Anon 12-Step meeting but I want to go back because it was helpful in showing me the addictive patterns I see in myself, such as perfectionism. As my brother reminds me, transformation, like recovery, is not an event, it is a process.

Listening to my brother's story, to his recollection of his childhood and early adolescent years when we both shared a home and family, I learned that his perception, though it may have differed from my own, was his reality. There was now no reason to dispute or explain what had been, even to excuse or forgive.

Another brother came to Family Group too, and the three of us have regular debriefing sessions. Now we know how to talk, to listen and not interrupt or tell each other ‘you've got it wrong’. We used to think there was one reality and you just fitted into it.

Over the ten weeks or so of my own Higher Ground experience, I learnt a new way of relating to family, based on mutual respect and on providing an emotional environment where it was safe to trust, where everyone has the right to be heard and not judged. ”

Family Group Rebuilds Relationships

Each Wednesday night up to 80 people attend four Family Groups at Higher Ground. Family Group is one of the most powerful components of Higher Ground's therapeutic programme. Attending Family Group considerably improves the chances of long-term recovery.

Family Group is where the spark of hope can be rekindled for clients and their families. "What seems to come out of it is an enormous amount of love," says Clinical Manager Johnny Dow. "Even though people are scared of going there and losing love, they actually gain it because they are saying what's going on."

Family Group can be the beginning of recovery and forgiveness, says Marie, a Higher Ground graduate who is now two years drug-free: "The very fact that the addict is in Higher Ground is the seed of hope, realising that we are not the only ones. Addiction isolates families as much as it does the addict."

The client often arrives at rock bottom, most of their resources – and those of their family – used up. Family relationships may have broken down and trust lost. Family members are sometimes angry, confused or hurt by the chaos created by the practicing addict, and may have rejected the addict after numerous efforts at rescuing. "With years of alcoholism I just felt martyred," says Colleen, whose partner has just graduated from Higher Ground. "I used to constantly make threats and not carry them through."

Frequently there are serious difficulties between the addict and his/her family, and it is clear that the best solution is to address those problems during the treatment programme.

"I feel enriched by having met all those people."

Family Group is about getting things said, being heard, setting boundaries and

rebuilding families. "I can now see the person I used to know years ago," says Colleen. "That person has only just surfaced because of Higher Ground. I don't have the feeling that everything I say he's going to take as criticism. I can laugh a lot more now. I'm a lot more prepared to say what I want and not just sit there with my mouth shut."

"Afterwards there's a sense of lifting the burden."

Family Group is about each family member learning to take responsibility. Marie's separated husband came for two sessions. "He read out a pretty challenging, gut wrenching letter about the impact of my addiction on our family, on him and our kids. You really did see the impact of addiction on the whole family and friends, not just on the addict, but you also experience the hope and healing that potentially comes from the group."

Not including the family in the treatment process increases the likelihood of relapse for the addict, and leaves the family members with unresolved issues. Most clients come from a family which has been affected or may be contributing to the addictive process.

As Marie says: "You see how the rest of the family gets hooked into the denial and dishonesty of addiction, and how the family ends up enabling and covering for addicts. My family put up with stuff they shouldn't have had to put up with and didn't know what to do about it. They were as powerless as I was until I finally admitted I needed

help."

Families may have lost the ability, or never had the skills to talk and listen. Family Group provides an opportunity to explore issues in a supportive environment with trained counsellors.

Says Anna, a family member: "The skill and compassion of the facilitators made an impression on me that was at least as strong as the stories I heard. I learnt that staying with feelings as they surface is the only way to diminish the power they have over us. I was able to observe the group leaders encouraging residents to stay with the feeling, not to push it back down or away, or to comment on or intellectualise the feeling."

Clients find Family Group one of the most powerful, honest and confronting at Higher Ground, says Clinical Manager Johnny Dow, because everyone in the story is in the room and the truth is not filtered. "They're talking about feelings that have been very deeply buried."

"I am really glad that our teenage daughter was allowed to go and have her say ... and finally be heard by her father"

"I find it tough work but for me it's the most interesting work here because there's so much going on and so much to look at."

Information is provided on the disease of addiction, the addictive process, about co-dependence and how to deal with interpersonal issues of addiction. Says Rick, a family member: "I gained an

How to Make a Referral to Higher Ground

Higher Ground welcomes self-referrals.

Health, social and legal professionals wishing to make a referral to Higher Ground should note that our admission criteria require residents to be over 20 years of age, have a primary diagnosis of alcohol or other drug dependence, an interest in 12 Step recovery and a drug free status on admission.

Referrals or self referrals can be made by telephoning Kathy Mildon on 09-834 0042 for a pre-admission assessment appointment on weekdays between 8.30am and 4.00pm.

Assessments in prisons, detox facilities or hospital can be arranged. Applicants who have outstanding legal charges are considered on a case by case basis. If required, Higher Ground can organise a medical detox through referral to the Auckland Regional Alcohol and Drug Services.

Making a Donation

Higher Ground is a registered Charitable Trust. Donations over \$5.00 are tax deductible and may be sent direct to Higher Ground. Higher Ground is dependent on charitable donations for the continuation of its programme.

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Contact Details

- Address • 118 Beach Road, Te Atatu Peninsula Waitakere 0610
- Mail to • PO Box 45 192 Te Atatu Peninsula Waitakere 0610
- Telephone • office 09-834 0017
• after care 09-834 0076
• admissions 09-834 0042
• residents 09-834 3700
- Office fax • 09-834 0018

awareness that I suffer from a lot of the things the addict suffers from, in terms of fear and feelings I haven't dealt with."

Group dynamics are used so people feel safe and so they know that they are not alone in their feelings. Says Rick: "I really valued the time there. It didn't matter which individual was talking because most of them were speaking from the heart. It was a very positive experience witnessing people wanting to change."

The goal is to help families in the healing process and explore the role of the family when the client leaves Higher Ground. "Initially I thought 'get in there, get yourself

sorted and do it now'," says Rick. "I now have a huge respect which I did not have before."

One-on-one counselling is also offered. Families are informed of on-going support such as the 12-Step Fellowship of Al-Anon and counselling services.

Says family member Anna: "I feel gratitude for the opportunity to sharing in my brother's recovery at Higher Ground and for my own experiences. There are still, of course, many challenging times but I feel optimistic for my brother, for myself and for our families because we have been provided with some great tools for life."

Thanks To Our Supporters

Greetings and best wishes for 2008

Our beautiful new premises seem to have enhanced our ability to provide quality recovery to people suffering from drug dependency. The therapeutic programme continues to build on its strengths and grow. As ever, we rely on your continued generosity and the work of volunteers, and thank you all for your support.

We hope you have enjoyed this issue of the Higher Ground News. If you do not wish to remain on our mailing list, or are incorrectly listed, please write to HGDRT, PO Box 45 192, Te Atatu Peninsula, Waitakere, 0610.
For further information about the Higher Ground rehabilitation programme phone Programme Director, Stuart Anderson 09-834 0017 or fax 09-834 0018 email hgdrtr@xtra.co.nz www.higherground.org.nz
