

Principles of Behavior Change and Relationship Building

Summarized by Thomas T. Thomas

Allies in Recovery (<https://alliesinrecovery.net>) is a group founded in 2003 to teach family members different ways of dealing with a loved one who suffers from substance abuse, and those principles can be applied to dealing with a person who is experiencing serious mental illness. At our October 25 meeting, we heard from **Dominique Simon-Levine**, one of the group's founders and their chief executive, and **Laurie MacDougall**, a former mathematics teacher and certified Peer Support Trainer. They explained the application of these principles at the point of crisis in a loved one's life.

Their core program is Community Reinforcement and Family Training (CRAFT). It was originally developed by the Psychology Department at the University of New Mexico, the Community Reinforcement Approach, to address problems of addiction and substance abuse. Training family members to deal with a person who is addicted was just one of eight modules in that approach. Allies in Recovery took this part of the program—at the time covering about 300 pages of academic and psychological discussion—and boiled it down to about a page of principles.

“This is something that gets at what a family can do,” Simon-Levine said. The essence is to create a partnership with your loved one, calming yourself down, and understanding what you are seeing without reactivity. “Working with a person in addiction,” she said, and this certainly applies to someone with serious mental illness, “is a life situation. It's not going to get cured in twelve to twenty-four weeks.”

CRAFT teaches a family member to become aware of patterns of interaction and what is going on in the day, in the moment. This is without being distracted by everything that has happened in the past or our hopes and fears for the future. It's about what you do when your loved one is using or about to use, or acting out under the influence of his or her illness.

The question you need to ask is, “Is my loved one using right now, or not?” Or, “Is this an aspect of his or her developing psychosis, or not?” Making that determination will guide what happens next and is a way for you to calm down and help the loved one calm down at the same time. When the parent or family member is calm, he or she is better able to communicate, able to model better behavior, change how he or she reacts, see what is going on, and either step in or step away.

Simon-Levine offered a scenario. You are the mother of a 30-year-old son who is living at home, has a problem with alcohol, is attending a program and seems okay. He has a job, and today is Friday, his payday. You have made plans to celebrate with a special pizza and a favorite movie. But the young man doesn't come home as planned and doesn't call. It's eight o'clock, nine o'clock, ten, midnight. You are worried and upset, becoming more and more frantic, thinking about calling the police. And finally, your son comes home. He's clearly been out drinking.

If you scream at him, he will become defensive, and that will start a fight. It's the usual pattern. He may storm out of the house, get back in his car, and drive off under the influence. That would be a bad outcome.

CRAFT teaches you to tweak the elements of the situation. By eight o'clock, you recognize that it's payday and he's probably celebrating at a bar. You put away the pizza, turn down the heat, get into your pajamas. When your son arrives at midnight, you say as little as possible. "I'm so glad you're home safe. I'll talk to you later. Good night." By doing this, you are aware of what's going on. You remain calm and set boundaries about how you will engage. You remove the immediate rewards—dinner and the movie—and leave your son in the dark and cold to figure things out.

If he comes home late but with no sign of drinking and explains that his car broke down, his cell phone battery died, and he had to take an Uber, then your reaction would be different. You would reward him with pizza. You are sorry to hear about his trouble and glad he made it home.

If you need to talk later, make sure that "later" is not when he's still intoxicated or hung over. You ask calmly, "Can we have a conversation about what happened last night?" And then you need to remain calm, take a moment, and deconstruct the event that you've seen a thousand times before.

"The CRAFT module is based solidly on communication with reflective listening," MacDougall said. The most difficult part of this is calming down your own emotions, pressing the pause button. But pausing does not mean just walking away.

First, you should acknowledge what you're feeling. Let these emotions briefly flood you, because it's okay to have them in a complicated situation with a lot of unhappy history. You give yourself permission to feel this way. You reframe everything in your mind to manage what's inside you.

Second, you ask yourself what values you want to present? And are they going to help your loved one deal with his or her problem? You want to bring "the most helpful me" to the situation. And do you know what your loved one is thinking?

Third, once you are managing those feelings in a positive way, you will know what to do and what skills to use in approaching the problem.

"Challenging feelings won't go away," MacDougall said. "But pressing the pause button—even if you do it grudgingly—is the beginning of self-care." In the chaos, in the angst of the moment, taking care of yourself brings your most helpful self to the situation. And it models a calmness and determination that your loved one can try to emulate. By withdrawing from the situation, you actually empower your loved one by showing them how to—and trusting that they can—get in control of themselves. You are, in effect, saying, "You don't need me to tell you what to do."

Key to this approach is letting your loved one know that you will come back later and address the issue. You need to anticipate that they won't always understand this yet. And when you have that conversation, you need to set ground rules, such as no yelling. You are teaching your loved one that there is acceptable behavior in the world. Setting boundaries for yourself models boundaries for your loved one.

There are positive aspects of the CRAFT process as well. In addition to controlling your own emotions, you want to reinforce your loved one's positive behaviors. This includes affirmations, validation, asking permission to share with them, and thanking them for sharing. You want to find moments when you can catch them doing something right and then show your appreciation.

“This can be a little thing,” MacDougall said. “Like, when you are bringing in groceries, make it an occasion to ask for help. And then sthank the loved one when they do.” This is not cheerleading, she said, but finding the peace inside and commending it.

Mental illness, like substance abuse, is not an entirely static situation. There are always moments of lucidity when you can discuss the issues. You need to find them—and have a plan for what you’re going to say. And then get the emotions out of the interaction.