

Stepping Stones Program – the Family Perspective

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Introduction and Aims: Affected family members (AFM) play a critical role in supporting a relative experiencing substance dependence. Family Drug Support (FDS) is an Australia-wide non-government organisation supporting AFM. Since 2001, FDS has delivered the psycho-educational program Stepping Stones to over 2000 families. This study explores the experience of AFM who participated in the program, with the aim of including families' perspectives within the academic conversation, in policy and in service delivery.

Design and Methods: Fourteen AFM who attended the Stepping Stones program between 2017 to 2019 contributed to this qualitative study. Telephone interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis. Data was analysed using interpretive phenomenological analysis.

Key Findings: Four key themes were abstracted from the data; these were: *Barriers to Accessing Support Services; The Power of Connection; Empowerment through Education; and Healing Family Systems*. AFM experienced a reframe of stigmatisation and the reinstatement of self-agency and efficacy, through boundary setting, conflict resolution and effective communication with their relative. Coping and resilience strategies built capacity within the family system.

Discussions and Conclusions: Diversity within the group setting in relation to socio-economic status, cultural background, parenting approaches, trauma stories and family constellation reflect the non-discriminatory nature of addiction. While normalisation of the experience and relief were recurrently reported, five participants revealed that protective factors were not enough to shield their relative from substance dependence. Overall, participation in the Stepping Stones program loosened the grip of family pathology, which had immobilised many AFM from engaging in help seeking.

Implications for Practice or Policy: AFM are marginalised by stigma. This research highlights the importance of educating health professionals on family inclusive and anti-oppressive practice and challenges systemic and culturally embedded discrimination against individuals and families affected by substance dependence.

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