Reclaim Your Family from Addiction

How Couples and Families Recover Love and Meaning

Craig Nakken
Author of The Addictive Personality
RECLAIM YOUR FAMILY FROM ADDICTION
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Craig Nakken
The book is dedicated to our niece and goddaughter

Jennifer Lynn Overkamp
January 21, 1982 to May 29, 1998

Thank you, Jenny,
for teaching all who met you about the
importance of love, family, community,
for your values and the way you lived them.
# Contents

Acknowledgments ............................................................................................................. xi

**Part 1: Love and Principles**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Introduction to Part 1</th>
<th>3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 1: Principles of Betterment</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two Types of Love</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principles of Betterment</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principles in Action</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 2: Human Drives</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internal Value of Drives</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Drive for Meaning</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why Meaning Must Be Most Important</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When the Drive for Pleasure Ranks First</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When the Drive for Power Ranks First</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How Do We Develop Our Drive for Meaning?</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Part 2: Stages of Family Addiction**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Introduction to Part 2</th>
<th>57</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 3: Stage 1: Adjustment</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Love No One Hears</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust Eroded</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Addiction Starts to Govern</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoidance and Control Replace Meaning</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Family Becomes Reactive</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Living within a Double Bind</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dialogue to Monologue</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Addict Increasingly Attacks the Family</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Family Monitors the Addict</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How Children Are Affected</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 4: Stage 2: Development of a Protective Persona</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Decay of Ethical Power</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Why Breaks Down</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decay of Love</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Contents

Communication Worsens ........................................ 97
Anger as Protection .............................................. 99
Survival Replaces Intimacy ....................................... 100
Family Becomes Polarized ....................................... 101
Distancing .......................................................... 103
Family Rituals Break Down ..................................... 104
Negative Happiness ............................................... 105
The Victim Persona .............................................. 107
Crises Become More Regular ................................... 108
New Rules Get Created .......................................... 109
Shame and Blame .................................................. 110
How Much Can a Family Take? ............................... 111

Chapter 5: Stage 3: Hopelessness ............................... 115
Gulfs Seem Unbridgeable ....................................... 116
Living in a State of Trauma ...................................... 118
Some Just Give Up ............................................... 120
Connections No Longer Hold .................................. 121
Need for New System ............................................ 123

Part 3: How the Addictive Process Affects Family Relationships

Introduction to Part 3 .............................................. 129
Chapter 6: Couples and the Addictive Process ............... 131
Becoming a Couple ............................................... 131
The Shift .......................................................... 134
A Couple’s Agreement: The Why of Being a Couple ........ 135
When Addiction Enters a Relationship ....................... 141

Chapter 7: Children and the Addictive Process ............... 151
A Child’s Loss of Innocence and Meaningful Attachments ... 151
How Addiction Affects Children at Different Stages of Development .................................................. 162
Conclusion .......................................................... 183
Part 4: Recovery

Introduction to Part 4 .......................... 187

Chapter 8: Early Recovery: Honesty and Tolerance .......... 199
  Need for Tolerance .................................. 202
  Parallel Recovery .................................. 203
  The Task of Early Recovery ......................... 206
  Leap of Faith ....................................... 208
  Listening to Others’ Stories and Telling Our Own ........ 210
  The Collapse ...................................... 211
  Reaching Out ...................................... 214
  Borrowing a Value System .......................... 215
  Spiritual Principles Most Helpful in Early Recovery .... 217
  Relapse Issues .................................... 220
  Shift from Other-Examination to Self-Examination ... 222

Chapter 9: Middle Recovery: Understanding and Acceptance 225
  Major Characteristics of This Time .................. 227
  More Spirituality and Family Stability ............... 229
  From Borrowed Values to Integrated Values .......... 231
  Spiritual Principles Most Helpful in Middle Recovery 233
  Safety Causes Surprises ............................ 236
  Reforming ......................................... 237

Chapter 10: Late Recovery: Love ......................... 241
  Healing the Past .................................. 241
  Mistakes Are Not Met with Overreactions ............ 244
  Dialogue and Recommitment ........................ 245
  Spiritual Principles Most Helpful in Late Recovery .. 247

The Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous ............... 253
Works Cited ........................................ 255
Index .................................................. 257
About the Author ..................................... 265
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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

– xii –
PART 1

LOVE AND PRINCIPLES
Scene 1

It was after 6:00 P.M. when Ted Jensen arrived home, grumbling to himself about his boss. Ted was late, but still within the twenty-minute guideline he and his wife, Maggie, had agreed upon before one would have had to call. As he entered the house, Ted heard the sizzle and spit of water spilling out of a pan of potatoes into flickering yellow flames. David, their six-year-old, was sitting in the kitchen on “The Chair” as it had become known. An egg timer on the table showed three minutes left. Ted walked over to his son and rubbed his hand through his hair. “I’ll talk to you soon,” he said.

“Shé’s in the bedroom,” David hollered as his dad left the kitchen.

Ted walked upstairs where he found Maggie, bent over, whisk broom in hand, cleaning up the scattered remains of her favorite lamp. He stood still and quiet. This was not a time for him to talk about how grumpy he felt. “You’re late!” she said gruffly.

Ted now had to choose. Does he complain and let her know that he, too, was having a bad day or does he try to be helpful?

At that moment, they both heard the egg timer go off downstairs. “I wish he could sit there till he graduates from high school,” Maggie said. There was just enough humor and apology in her voice for them to share a brief smile.
“Yeah, I’m late, but within our twenty-minute limit,” he said as he kissed her cheek. “Can I help?”

David suddenly appeared at the door. For a moment, Maggie and David stared at each other. “We don’t play pirate in the house,” she said to her son.

David knew how important the lamp was to his mother, but still he tried to defend himself: “But, it’s winter outside.”

“That’s why we have jackets!” Ted said to let David know he was dealing with two parents and not just one. Ted walked over to his son and put his arm around his shoulder. “Honey, you finish up here. David and I will finish fixing supper.”

“Thanks.” Maggie felt calmer. “You help Dad, Mr. Pirate.”

The entire family was finding a way to weather the crisis. Half an hour later, while sitting at the dinner table, David apologized: “I’m sorry, Mom. I didn’t mean to break your lamp.”
Essence of Family

We start this part, and every part hereafter, with a scene from the Jensen family to illustrate particular principles. This scene represents a typical family at dinnertime. Working parents like Ted and Maggie often arrive home at the end of the day to face a set of tasks very different from the ones they manage at work. Though the family may have developed a system for picking up children at day care and making supper, annoying problems such as broken lamps can disrupt the routine. Family interaction isn’t always fun. The Jensen family scene may seem familiar and simple, but underlying the routines are complex issues. That’s because family isn’t simple. Families are made up of a mixture of personalities and must deal with a wide array of tasks, emotions, hopes, values, struggles, and solutions.

The very makeup of a family today is not cut and dried. Besides the traditional two-parent families, there are blended families with children from different marriages, interracial families, adopted families, single-parent families, families with gay or lesbian parents, foster-parent families, families of origin, and the human family—our community. Additionally, families are not static. The individual family members constantly change, grow, and learn. This creates a unique composition and energy for each family. For example, one family may prefer to spend their Saturday afternoon at the local art museum and another at a baseball game. And let’s not forget that families come together with a history. This means that, in addition to a family’s immediate members, distant relatives from generations ago subtly shape and influence a family’s spirit and rituals.

I recently attended a family reunion in the Midwest with more than two hundred relatives who shared a history
started by two pioneers who homesteaded a hundred sixty acres of prairie in the 1800s. At the reunion, the family spirit that was set in motion long ago and that had been passed through four generations now seemed palpable, as real and nurturing to me as the cherry pies, conversations, balloons, and softball games. Among the laughter and chatter of children, aunts and uncles, grandmothers and grandfathers at the picnic tables, I heard a distant voice chant: remember the beginning, remember the past, remember the prairie. Like other families, my family feels a certain unity from our collective history. These experiences from the past, however, mean more than just a set of dates and facts. They teach us about the values and principles that our ancestors lived by—and that we live by today. Indeed, families need to foster and develop a strong principle-based life to maintain relationships and connections among themselves, if not to other generations and relatives. Principles and values are critical in shaping the family. Without them, the family will not thrive. To understand the Jensens, we must understand the nature of love itself, how Ted and Maggie like any couple began their lives together and eventually the lives of their children. This book is about love and families created by spiritual principles, called principles of betterment; families that are destroyed by alcoholism and addiction; and families that recover and realign themselves along spiritual principles and meaning.
Two Types of Love

The principle task for every couple and family is to create and sustain love. Love is the very blood of families. Two types of love are critical in shaping the direction and purpose of any couple or family: formless love and created love.

Formless Love

Most people have experienced formless love at some time in their lives. It is instinctual love. We sometimes call it “chemistry,” the “spark” or “click” that couples often feel when they first meet. Formless love is primarily a sensory experience. The quality of the relationship is determined by how it feels. If it feels good, you continue. If the first date doesn’t feel right, you usually find a nice way to say thank you and good-bye.

Formless love is “blind” to the frailties and shortcomings of the other, and it alone cannot shape a life or direction for the couple. However, it does contain the
ingredients from which “true” love can emerge. If we compare formless love to an art, then it is the clay that the sculptor has yet to shape into something meaningful and formed. Formless love possesses the words to a poem that hasn’t been structured into sentences and stanzas; it contains the colors, brushes, canvases, and beautiful emotional scenery, but these components haven’t been formed or imagined into a new creative life of its own. In short, formless love, though brimming with desire and “chemistry,” is without shape, principles, goals, or meaning. A couple can experience formless love for many years—an entire life in fact. It takes more than chemistry and sparks to create enduring love.

Struggling to sustain their ten-year marriage, a couple who were in their forties came to me for therapy. When I asked them to describe their early courtship, their eyes lit up. “It was wonderful,” Karen said. “We would sit and dream together. He would listen to my stories, thoughts, hopes, and I’d look at him thinking he was the most handsome man I had ever seen. And he was.” Richard blushed and added: “She was quite the dreamer, and they were good dreams. She gave words to things I’d always felt but couldn’t articulate. She made me feel whole.” As they talked about their early formless love, a strength and vitality enlivened each of them. However, desires, dreams, and good intentions alone cannot create a solid relationship.

Richard and Karen’s love had remained formless for many years. It hadn’t yet grown out of its infancy. This was their pain. They were haunted by unrealized dreams. Something more was needed. They had all the ingredients—the clay, words, colors—to create love and meaning, but they had not done so.
A set of skills, along with ingredients, are needed to shape love in a meaningful way. As faith without works is empty, so love without skills is also empty; that is, it remains formless. Defining love as a set of skills may not be very romantic, but skills are exactly what is needed in the long run to keep romance alive. Any couple who want to develop and deepen their love must acquire skills, acquire spiritual principles, and be willing to practice living by these principles until they become a natural part of everyday life.

Richard and Karen needed to move into the second and most important type of love: created love. Although the couple wanted an intimate relationship, they lacked skills to create true intimacy. They had simply never learned how to move a relationship to the next level: the level where couples create love that nourishes and sustains the relationship. Both had come from severely abusive families. Early in their marriage, Richard drank too much and once, during an argument, hit Karen. It was the only such incident in the marriage, but the violence sent both of them back into unresolved feelings from their youth. They couldn’t get past this turbulent period of their marriage. My task as their therapist was to teach them the skills, developed from spiritual principles, that they needed to resolve issues and bring their marriage to the next level. The goal of recovery and therapy is simple: to return individuals to their humanity and their ethics, and in so doing restore their ability to love themselves and others and to create love in their relationships.

Created Love
Created love is defined as formless love transformed. Created love is clay finally shaped by a sculptor into a beautiful piece of pottery; words meaningfully composed
into stanzas and poems; colors brushed onto a canvas into something that has never before been seen. Created love is very much like an object of art—a spiritual art. It takes the energy and power of formless, instinctual love, and, without breaking its spirit, uses and turns its raw desires into skills, structures, discipline, and commitment.

In order to understand and create recovery, then, we must first understand love and the skills we use to demonstrate love on a daily basis. Love is difficult to discuss because the subject is so vast. All of us define and conceptualize love in slightly different ways. However, we would all agree that love is transformed from a formlessness into a creation when we use skills based on principles of betterment. (We’ll discuss these spiritual principles on pages 42–52.)

Unlike formless love, created love has the power to resolve conflicts and bind individuals together into a force that produces growth and betterment for all involved. Created love is the highest and most developed form of love. It evolves from spiritual discipline and is guided by spiritual principles. Created love helps transform us from human beings to spiritual beings. Because active addicts and alcoholics refuse to abandon the sensations of the human world for the principles of a spiritual one, they are unable to experience the joys and refuge that can be found in created love. Rather, the sensations of the high are the addict’s only sanctuary.

Created love works to bind together past, present, and future. It believes in a future and takes it into account. We act in loving ways not just to feel good, but because today’s actions are tomorrow’s foundation. In created love, fun and excitement naturally evolve into joy and contentment.
The creative and destructive aspects of our humanity are also connected in creative love. This type of love is neither unconditional nor conditional, but a blend of the two. We might describe created love as a paradox, as unconditional love with conditions attached to it. The I’ll-love-you-no-matter-what-you-do attitude of unconditional love is romantic and unreasonable to assume in any family, let alone in an addictive family system. With this attitude, principles get sacrificed. However, conditional love, I’ll-love-you-only-after-you’ve-met-certain-conditions, is unreasonable to expect of addicts and alcoholics. Addicts can rarely meet these conditions.

Created love combines conditions with an attitude of unconditional positive regard. It is a higher form of love. It states: “I’ll always love you, and because of this I’ll put conditions on you and me that must be met if love is to mean anything. These conditions or principles, such as respect, are more important than you or I. In order for us to grow in love, you and I must demonstrate these principles through our actions.”

An example may be helpful. A few months back I watched a television interview of a mother caught in a horrible situation. Her son had told her he was going to murder someone. She couldn’t stop him and the murder was committed. She ended up turning him in to the police and being the main witness against him in court. Although this woman could have lied to protect her son from the consequences of his behavior, that would have reduced her to being a coconspirator instead of a mother. She was in anguish. If convicted, her son could receive the death penalty. In an interview, she said: “I love him and I’ll always love him, but there are more important things than him or me. What he did was wrong. The only way left for me to be
truly his mother was to turn him in. I pray that he understands.” What she did was the most loving thing she could have done for her son.

As a loved one gets sicker from addiction, family members often compromise their own principles and integrity. They may lie to employers, deceive other family members, or ignore threatening behavior. They do this in the name of love, but it is not love. It is the addictive process itself. Family members often compromise themselves by enabling irresponsible behavior. The honest spouse may often find himself in situations where he feels forced to lie about the condition of his spouse, betraying his own ethics and principles.

The family feels caught in a double bind. Do members act according to principles, such as honesty, that support love, or do they lie to protect the addicted family member? While they may believe they have to choose between the two, they can stay attached to both: their principles and the addict. This solution, based on created love, combines unconditional love with conditions or principles. Remember, the primary spiritual task of families is to create and sustain love.

**Principles of Betterment**

Created love is conditional as far as it puts what’s best for us ahead of what we want. In recovery this is often referred to as placing principles before personalities. Principles make love more dependable. They are the workhorses of love and drive a couple or family to meaningful relationships. When we live our lives according to the principles of betterment, love is created and spiritual growth occurs. Examples of principles for betterment include truth, love, and equality. These principles of betterment help us to
see love as more than a set of fast-moving emotions and chemistry. Through these principles, love becomes tangible and can be transformed into a set of skills.

Principles of betterment also allow and teach us to surrender our egos, a skill that is needed to form intimate relationships. By repeatedly putting principles before personality, we gain control over our own egos. We learn that the principles of betterment are more important than any one of us.

If we put our egos before principles, on the other hand, we are saying we are more important than these principles. We abandon truth for a terrible, destructive illusion.

For more years than I care to remember, I acted in an unprincipled and unkind manner. As an addict, I stole, cheated, and for years was either doing something illegal or in the possession of something illegal. I was cruel to my family, my friends, and anyone who showed me any care, unless being with them meant I could secure more drugs. I chased after any sensations that might promise me moments of pleasure or a sense of power. Principles were sacrificed to that goal.

In recovery, I started spending time with people who believed in principles more than personalities, power, or pleasure. They told me to do small acts of respect. Near self-destruction and with no other real choice, I did what I was told and began asking others how their day was. I listened. I began showing up on time. If someone needed help, say moving furniture, I helped. I did small acts of kindness on a regular daily basis. At the time, I didn’t know these acts would add up and help me become a more honorable person. Yet one day I woke up and realized that I had become respectable. Instead of being on the outside of the human community, I was back in it. I was home.
I was no longer a beast. I was more human than predator. I was again part of the human family. One of the most beautiful things that came from this is that I could now let in the love that others had for me.

To recover from a spiritual illness—addiction—I needed the help of spiritual principles or principles of betterment. Spirituality in its simplest form is the ability to connect with the healing properties of spiritual principles and allow them to direct our lives. In this way, we become “principled.” Our spirit is renewed.

Remember Ted in the opening scene of part 1? He hesitated, then decided to put aside his frustrations of the day and help his wife, Maggie, with her frustrations over the broken lamp. In doing so, he placed a spiritual principle of support ahead of his own desire to whine or complain. This is how love is created and sustained. As Maggie hears Ted reminding her not to argue about being late, she is placing the spiritual principle of restraint ahead of her own anger and frustration. Again, love is sustained. Even young David, sitting in “The Chair,” is able to consider how his mother might feel about her favorite lamp lying in pieces. Empathy is an essential principle of love.

Family is where we’re first taught or not taught to place spiritual principles before our narrower egos.

**Principles in Action**

As humans, we are spiritually responsible for bringing principles of betterment to life through our actions; we are responsible for becoming their representatives. For example, when we repeatedly act out of respect, we become respectable and eventually respected. Others experience dignity when we treat them respectfully. As we become “principles in action,” we contribute the spirit of these
principles to the world, and in exchange we feel the peace and serenity that they hold. Serenity is a by-product of living by and staying attached to principles of betterment.

But this means that we must put these principles into action. Principles are just concepts until we make them a part of our everyday lives. We can speak all we want about love, but we're not loving until our actions embody this principle. When our actions resemble love, most often we need not speak of love—our actions speak for themselves. Twelve Step programs differentiate between those who “walk the walk” and those who “talk the talk.” A big difference exists between living a principled life and merely talking about it.

All of this may sound well and good, but it doesn’t seem very practical, or it would be too time-consuming, or we have enough to deal with right now. . . . Such resistance to change demonstrates a deeper resistance to living a life directed by principles. It is natural to resist change to some degree. Change always involves fear, loss, and grief. However, when we live by principles, we become less resistant, more open to change. The more we surrender our egos over to principles, the more accustomed we'll get to it, and the less scary it will become to be vulnerable in our relationships.

Conversely, if we defend our egos against higher principles, we become more afraid and less open to a spiritual transformation. We decide it’s best to go it alone, to do it our way; we’re less willing to be vulnerable and change.

At times, all of us become so afraid of change that we resist it and stop our growth and development. When we do this, the pain (guilt) of being separate from our principles emerges. Our conscience may remind us of them and bring us back in line with who we are and who
we want to become. The addict, however, uses the intoxication experience to avoid or deaden this pain and in so doing slows down or prohibits spiritual growth. For the addict, guilt often becomes a trigger to use.

To better understand how couples and families create love and meaning, and choose to live their lives according to spiritual principles, let us first work to understand the nature of being human.
As human beings, we make choices that determine what type of life we will lead. These choices, in turn, are determined by the drives, or impulses, that we live by. A drive is our collective desires, beliefs, personal histories, and attitudes that have become strong enough to direct a course of action. Four major human drives are ultimately responsible for how we choose to live. They are the drives for

- connection
- meaning
- pleasure
- power

How we weave these four drives together in our lives dictates much of our behavior. All are necessary; none are right; none are wrong; all are neutral. We need to develop skills that allow us to comfortably use and live within each of these drives. If we live out of only one or two of these drives, we’ll be incomplete.
Index

AA. See Alcoholics Anonymous (AA)
acceptance and understanding, during recovery, 225–39
accountability, and recovery, 233
adaptation, negative, 77–78
addiction
defined, 21
spiritual cravings, 21
stages of, 63
See also family addiction
adjustment
and addiction, 63, 65–89
behavioral effects, 71–72
children, effect on, 85–89
communication, 79–80, 89
emotional effects, 72–73, 89
family, effect on, 89
mental effects, 72
spiritual effects, 73–74
adolescence, and addictive process, 162, 180–83
After Virtue (MacIntyre), 210, 255
AIDS, 24, 235
Al-Anon, 132n, 148, 225–26
Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), 43, 148, 253
Alcoholics Anonymous, 28, 50–51, 190, 255
anger, as protection, 99–100
Art of Loving, The (Fromm), 42n, 50, 147, 255
assumptions, within relationships, 137
attacks, by addict toward family, 80–83
avoidance
replaces meaning, 75–76
and pleasure, 19, 53, 193
balance and harmony, during recovery, 247–48
Becker, Ernest, 23–24, 255
behavioral interactions, 71–72
betterment, principles of. See principles, of betterment
blame
as defense, 44–45, 192
and fear, 38, 39
and power, 38, 39
during recovery, 192, 195
and responsibility, 195–97
and shame, 110–11
Bowby, John, 157, 255
case studies
cocaine use, 32–33
family addiction, 57–58, 59, 129–30
human drives, 22
love and principles, 3–4, 5, 6, 14
power, 41–42
recovery, 187–88
Castaneda, Carlos, 18
change, resistance to, 15, 19, 20, 53, 123–24, 193
children
and addictive process, 151–83
adjustment stage, effect on, 85–89
attachment needs, 85–89, 151–53, 157–60
developmental stages, 162–83
innocence lost, 151–57
mutual regulation, 169–71
purpose, sense of, 171–75
resilient, 151, 177–78
See also psychosocial development stages
Children of Alcoholics Foundation, 112
choice, and responsibility, 43–45
choice-points, and meaning, 43–45
coa-addicts, 134, 142–46, 200
cocaine and pleasure, case study, 32–33
communication
during adjustment stage, 79–80, 89
during hopelessness stage, 121–23, 125
during protective persona stage, 97–99, 113
during recovery, early, 205, 224
during recovery, late, 245–47
community and service, during recovery, 248–51
connection(s)
children, need for, 157
drive for, 17, 19, 20, 53
and hopelessness, 121–23
during recovery, 193
conscience, and guilt, 26
control
replaces meaning, 75–76
and power, 19, 53, 193
couples
and addictive process, 131–49
agreements, 135–41, 143, 147
See also family; love; relationships
Covey, Stephen, 50, 255
created love
defined, 9–12
and paradox, 11, 133
responsibility for choices, 44
cises, within family, 108–9

D
denial
defined, 93
as numbing, 23–24
depression, and giving up, 120–21
developmental stages. See psychosocial development stages
discipline
and human drives, 19, 53
loving, 50
and meaning, 50–51
and principles, 51
and recovery, 235–36
restrictive, 50
and selfishness, 50
spiritual, 50, 51
distancing
during hopelessness stage, 116–18
during protective persona stage, 103–4
as self-care, 103–4
dominant relationships, 37–38, 140–41
drives, human. See human drives

E
eyearly recovery
characteristics, 224
collapse, 211–14
communication, 205, 224
faith, 208–10
family interactions, 224
fellowship, 218–19
honesty, 199–202, 217–18
parallel recovery, 203–6
reaching out, 214–15
relapse issues, 220–22
self-examination, 222–23
shame, 205
sharing stories, 210–11
spirituality, 207–8, 217–20
support system, 215–17
surrender, 219–20

tasks, 206–8, 224
tolerance, 199–203
value system, 215–17
emotional interactions, 72–73, 89, 114, 125
Erikson, Erik, 162–65, 169, 171, 173, 255
Escape from Evil (Becker), 23–24, 255

faith, and recovery, 208–10
family
and addictive process, 129–30
collective history, 6
essence of, 5–6
reforming during recovery, 237–38
stability and recovery, 229–31
See also children; couples;
relationships
family addiction
case studies, 57–58, 59, 129–30
characteristics, 190–91
crisis become regular, 108–9
deterioration of family, 111–12
essence of, 59
interactions distorted, 71–74, 89, 113, 123, 125
monitoring of addict, 83–85
polarization, 101–3
reactive, family as, 76–78
rituals break down, 104–5
rules, new ones created, 109–10
stages of, 57–125
See also specific stages of family
addiction; specific stages of
recovery
fear and blame, and power, 38, 39
fellowship, and recovery, 218–19
Florida Summer School of
Addiction, v
formless love, 7–9

Frankl, Viktor E., 24, 132, 146, 255
Fromm, Erich, 42, 50, 147, 255

Gam-Anon, 225–26
Gandhi, Mahatma, 28
Gibran, Kahlil, 49, 255
giving up, and hopelessness, 120–21
Granhult Treatment Center
(Ramsberg, Sweden), v
gratitude, and recovery, 234–35

H

happiness, negative, 105–7
harmony and balance, during
recovery, 247–48
healing circles, 211
Higher Power, 148, 205, 207
honesty
within families, 12
and recovery, 199–202, 217–18
and tolerance, 199–203
hopelessness
and addiction, 63, 115–25
communication, 121–23, 125
distancing, 116–18
emotional effects, 125
giving up, 120–21
trauma, 118–20
human drives, 17–53

See also specific human drives
humanity, and recovery, 193
humility, and recovery, 233–34
infancy, and addictive process, 162, 163–65
innocence
created, 155–56
vs. knowledge, 154–57
loss of, 151–57
intensity, 27–28
intervention, 63
intimacy
destruction of, 130
vs. survival, 100–101
Jensen family case studies
family addiction, 57–58, 59, 129–30
human drives, 22
love and principles, 3–4, 5, 6, 14
recovery, 187–88
late recovery
characteristics, 252
communication, 245–47
family interactions, 252
harmony/balance, 247–48
healing past wounds, 241–44
love, 241–52
mistakes forgiven, 244–45
recommitment, 245–47
service and community principles, 248–51
spirituality, 247–51
tasks, 252
Life Cycle Completed, The (Erikson), 162–65, 173, 255
love
and addictive process, 68–70
concept vs. sensation, 49
created, 7, 9–12, 44, 133
decay of, 96–97
defined as set of skills, 9, 12
and family addiction, 68–70
formless, 7–9
and intensity, 27–28
and power, 37–38
and principles, 3–6
during recovery, 191, 241–52
restoring, 191
two types of, 7–12
See also couples; family; relationships
MacIntyre, Alasdair, 210, 255
Man’s Search for Meaning (Frankl), 24, 132, 255
May, Rollo, 33, 93, 157, 255
meaning
vs. avoidance, 75–76
choice-points, 43–45
vs. control, 75–76
creating, 132
and discipline, 50–51
drive for, 17, 19, 20–22, 42–51,
53, 193
as priority, 23–24
and responsibility, 45–46
and sacrifice, 46, 48–49
and submission, 46–47
and surrender, 46, 47–48
and transformation, 19, 53, 193
mental interactions, 72
middle recovery
acceptance, 225–39
accountability, 233
characteristics, 227–29, 239
discipline, 235–36
family interactions, 239
family stability, 229–31
gratitude, 234–35
humility, 233–34
reforming, 237–38
safety, 236–37
spirituality, 229–31, 233–36
About the Author

Craig Nakken, M.S.W., L.I.C.S.W., L.M.F.T., is a lecturer, trainer, and family therapist who, for over twenty years, has specialized in the treatment of addictions and in counseling couples. He has a private practice in Saint Paul, Minnesota. He speaks and trains professionals, nationally and internationally, on the topics of addiction, family, and principle-centered therapy. He is the author of the best-selling book *The Addictive Personality* and other related publications.
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What happens to the "we" of a family when one member opts for the blind and single-minded "me" of addiction? In an instructive, reassuring way, Craig Nakken explains just how families and couples who have spent years building a life together can lose their cohesive identity and meaning in the wake of addiction. The perfect starting point in the healing process, this book also reminds us that recovery is possible—for individuals, couples, and whole families—if only we know what to do. With histories and personal stories, the book helps readers chart their own way out of the hell of addiction and back to the fullness of family by using principles that restore the "we" of lasting, loving relationships.

Craig Nakken, M.S.W., author of The Addictive Personality and Men’s Issues in Recovery, lectures, trains, and specializes as a family therapist in the treatment of addiction. He lives in Minneapolis, Minnesota.