

## Writing the Letters

(Taken from "lovefirst.net, Checklist, Articles and Tools, Writing the Letters" By Jeff Jay)

Interventions are most successful when they are very tightly scripted. For this reason, we like to use letters as a tool for keeping the team members on track. We address this in our book, "Love First: A New Approach to Intervention for Alcoholism and Drug Addiction."

"During an intervention, emotions can run high. It is most effective if each person writes a letter to the alcoholic to read during the intervention. Letters prevent you from exploding into spontaneous anger or freezing up at the last moment."

Any hint of anger or blame during an intervention is fatal. The addict will be listening intently for any sign of recrimination, as this presents a golden opportunity to start a fight. Once the anger flares, and an argument ensues, the intervention is destroyed. To guard against this calamity, we use letters to script our remarks, and to maintain a clear and positive tone.

The letters have several parts, which I will describe in detail. But first I'd like to share with you a real letter from a family member that was used during a successful intervention, quoted from our book, Love First:

"Dear Dad,

We don't talk about it ever, but I love you very much. I know you love me very much, and you are very proud of me. I wouldn't be where I am, or have what I have, if it weren't for you. You taught me that I need to learn how to take care of myself before I rely on anyone else to do it for me. You encouraged me and supported me in my career aspirations. This gave me the confidence I needed to accept job positions that took me throughout the Midwest on my own.

When I went through my major heartbreak with Tom, you were the one whose shoulder I cried on. You were the one I trusted. You helped me get through it.

Dad, your alcoholism has been a part of our lives for a very long time. We didn't get here overnight. It is running your life. When I call home to check in, if it is too late in the evening, you're drunk. You get on the phone and your speech is slurred. When we talk later in the week you don't even remember our conversations. Sometimes you're passed out, and we don't get to talk at all.

When I come to visit you, and I'm on my way out to walk the dog, if you're in the garage I'll try to wait a little while because I don't want to catch you secretly pouring a drink. I do this to save you embarrassment. Or else I try to make a lot of noise in the laundry room so you know I'm coming, and you can hide the alcohol.

If I show up at your house late in the evening, you're drunk. I see it in your eyes, hear it in your speech and watch you move back and forth from the kitchen cupboard to the couch, with an occasional trip to the garage to drink from your hidden supply.

I love you, and I don't like seeing alcoholism sucking the life out of you. We're all here together because we want you to accept help. We're here to help. Will you accept our help today?

Love,

Your daughter, Tina"

There are several parts to a good intervention letter, and all of them are displayed in the example above. The letter should begin with a simple statement of love and concern. You, as the writer of this letter, are an important part of the alcoholic's life, so your statement should come straight from the heart.

Next and most importantly, you must recall a time when the alcoholic has been especially helpful to you, or when you have been proud of the alcoholic. Gratitude is the last thing that the addict is expecting to hear. When an intervention begins, the alcoholic will know intuitively what it's all about. He or she will be on guard, and ready to do anything to derail the intervention. Imagine the surprise on the alcoholic's face when letters are read that begin with heartfelt memories of pride and thanks. The alcoholic will be completely disarmed. Instead of starting an argument, the addict will often start to weep. This unique element is a key technique of the "Love First" approach.

The next part is optional, and in fact it was not used in the letter cited above, but I like to use it in many cases. In this section, you should make a brief statement about your new understanding of alcoholism as a disease, and your desire for the addict to get help in a formal treatment setting. This statement will have the effect of taking the addiction problem out of the moral sphere and putting it into the medical arena. Here is an example:

"Tom, I've taken some time to learn about chemical dependency, and I've learned that it is a disease that requires medical treatment. This is not a question of your willpower. It is a question of getting real help for a real illness."

This should be followed by a statement of facts about the alcoholic's negative behavior. As Sergeant Joe Friday used to say: "The facts ma'am, just the facts." In this section of the letter, you will need to recall several specific instances that illustrate the alcohol or drug problem. These facts must come from your own first-hand knowledge, not hearsay. They should be the kind of facts that would tell any impartial observer that there was a chemical dependency problem. For instance, our letter quoted above states: "When I call home to check in, if it is too late in the evening, you're drunk. You get on the phone and your speech is slurred." The alcoholic cannot argue with first-hand experience.

In the next part of the letter, you will repeat your love and concern, and then ask the addict to accept help for the illness. You may be quite specific about this, and may even name the treatment center that you want them to enter.

When this simple letter format is repeated by all the people on the team, it has a very powerful effect on the alcoholic. Gradually, you will see the addict's denial slip away. The weight of the facts combined with the loving calm of the group will gently bring the addict into a moment of clarity where he or she can accept help.

Sometimes the alcoholic will want to continue the conversation. It is important that the team stick with their game plan, and have only one person answer the objections to treatment (as noted in the previous article). Often, the silence and self-control of the group will have a confounding effect on the alcoholic. He or she may try to start an argument, but to no avail.

As we have spelled out in our book, *Love First*, the chairperson must continue to speak for the group after the letters are read. In addition to answering objections, the chairperson will handle any questions that the addict brings up, and will keep the other team members from getting emotionally entangled.

In my experience, very few interventions require the use of a 'bottom line' to influence the alcoholic to accept help. However, in about 5% of the cases, it may be necessary.

The bottom line that each team member brings to the intervention can be described as the natural consequence that should follow if the alcoholic refuses help. For example, in an intervention that I facilitated in Florida, the grown son of the alcoholic told me about how terrified his small children were of their drunken Grandfather. The son decided during the planning stages that if his father would not accept treatment, then he would no longer be able to see his grand children. The son was making a difficult decision, but as the father of two small children, there was no other appropriate alternative. Here's what he said:

"Dad, I'm sorry to hear that you won't accept the help that we're offering you today. Obviously, it's your choice to make. But I cannot continue to subject my two beautiful children to your abusive alcoholic behavior. So, until you complete treatment and become involved in a program of recovery, I cannot allow you to see your grand children."

Needless to say, the alcoholic was thunderstruck. He blustered and threatened and tried to pick a fight, but no one responded. They let his words hang in mid-air without a reply. Finally, the son said to his alcoholic father, "Dad, your grandkids just want their Pappy back." Both men started to cry, and the stubborn old gentleman was admitted into treatment that same day.

Take time in preparing your letters. When it comes time to rehearse the intervention, be sure to read them all aloud. Often, other team members will help you to edit out inappropriate statements of anger or blame that you did not intend.

Letters can be a critical part of the treatment process, as well. Many addicts will lie about their use when they finally get into treatment. The intervention team should send copies of their letters to the counselor. In this way, the documented facts will continue to play an important role in the recovery process.

In closing, I want to share a powerful experience I had recently. I was called to a prominent university hospital to facilitate an intervention at a woman's bedside. This successful female entrepreneur was suffering from cirrhosis, and had recently experienced complete liver failure. Yet she would not accept the need for treatment and recovery. Her doctors were not willing to put her on the list for a liver transplant, because she would not deal with her alcoholism. Her family was at their wits' end.

Family members flew in from all over the country. The medical team participated as well. The letters that were composed and read by her family were profoundly moving. They told her how much they loved her, even in her disease, and how proud they were of her many accomplishments. Most of all, they recalled instances when she had helped them or inspired them, and this brought tears to everyone's eyes. Although she was a very tough case, and had a lot of pointed questions about treatment, she finally had a change of heart, and agreed to be transferred into an inpatient center, after her release from the hospital. The assembled group wept with gratitude and love.

Three days later, to everyone's shock and surprise, she died. At 40 years of age, this bright and successful businesswoman had been killed by chronic alcoholism.

In preparing for the funeral, her family told me how grateful they were. The intervention brought the entire group together as a real family, sharing their love and concern with more honesty than they ever had before. More than that, they were able to tell their alcoholic how proud they were of her, how much they loved her, and how much she meant to them.

As it turned out, they weren't able to save her life. But they were able to create a moment of grace for her, in which she made the sacred choice to change her life.

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