

8 Ways to Help when Loving Someone with an Addiction

The pathway to healing and recovery is often a journey that can progress over multiple years. Addiction not only involves the individual suffering from the substance use disorder, but their partner, their family, and their friends as well.

When supporting a partner or family member who is in active addiction to alcohol or other drugs, it's critically important that you also take care of your well-being. It is a balancing act of offering support to your partner (or friend or family member) in navigating the treatment and recovery options available, while at the same time not losing sight of what you need to be happy and healthy.

Find 8 tips below for how to balance supporting the positive health behaviors of your partner, while also taking care of yourself.

1. Set Boundaries

It is important to set ground rules for your relationship, especially when you believe your partner may be developing or actively suffering from a substance use disorder. Boundaries are clearly outlined expectations or rules set forth so that both partners know what behaviors are acceptable.

This avoids the potential for unwittingly positively reinforcing substance use, and can help to avoid feeling constantly frustrated or angry with your significant other's behavior—angry at being taken advantage of financially, manipulated emotionally, or helpless in the face of the substance use disorder.

Setting boundaries protects your personal health and well-being, is more likely to help your addicted loved one, and can help ensure that you'll be satisfied with the relationship as well.

Some examples of common boundaries (that can be agreed upon through discussion with your addicted loved one) include:

- No alcohol and other drugs allowed in the house
- Not allowed in the house when intoxicated
- No alcohol or other drug-using friends allowed in the house
- No personal communication when intoxicated (i.e., no calls, texts, etc.)
- No asking to borrow things (e.g. money, car, cell phone, etc.)

2. Practice Self-Care

“Put your own oxygen mask on first before helping others.” You won't be able to help your partner if you can't help yourself. Try to maintain your own self-care routines as much as possible. This will build resiliency.

3. Educate Yourself

An important first step in helping your partner is understanding their substance use. Educate yourself on substance use disorders and available resources. By doing this, you are not only empowering yourself to make well-informed decisions, but you are also ready and equipped with information when your partner decides they are ready to seek help.

Some starter research points include:

- Know the signs of an overdose and enroll in a Narcan (opioid overdose reversal medication) training course.

Learn about the biological (e.g., substances' effects on brain changes) and environmental (triggers, peer influences, substance availability, etc.) underpinnings of addiction and the many different and varied pathways to recovery.

Stay up to date on the latest research in treating addiction and helping people recover.

Familiarize yourself with the proper terms and language (which avoids stigmatizing language) to better communicate and address your partner's condition in an objective and constructive way.

4. Get Outside Input

With the shame and stigma that goes along with alcohol or other drug addiction, it is easy for affected loved ones to become increasingly secretive and isolated. Seek help and outside advice early and often. Talk to friends, people and family members in recovery who have the lived experience of what you're going through, and seek the help of addiction specialists.

When asking for and seeking help, there are several different options available:

Peer Support: Peer support groups for loved ones are structured non-clinical relationships that work to engage, educate, and support family and friends that have been affected by a loved one's substance use. These peer-to-peer groups for partners include: Al-Anon, Nar-Anon, Learn2cope, and SMART Recovery Family and Friends. Peer support groups can be a great resource for avoiding feelings of isolation; finding others who relate to your reality (and the reality of your partner); and engaging the processes of personal storytelling, connection, and guidance.

Professional Help: Trained professionals in addiction are out there and ready to help. There are proven methods to help you specifically (e.g., CRAFT). Together with your partner, you could try family therapy or behavioral couple's therapy, but keep in mind that your partner may not be ready or willing to go. If this should occur, don't hesitate to seek out a therapist's services for yourself (e.g., counseling). This can be a useful way to de-stress and talk to someone who can help you better navigate your relationship.

Technological Intervention: There has been a rapid growth in online services and support for addiction. Attend peer support meetings online, ask questions in free online forums (e.g., Learn2cope.org; Allies in Recovery), download apps with daily meditations onto your phone, or find online services where you can talk to licensed professionals

5. Consider Co-Occurring Disorders

Comorbidity is the occurrence of two or more disorders or illnesses in the same person. According to the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA), the likelihood of a mental illness diagnosis doubles for individuals suffering from a substance use disorder. Your partner may be more willing to talk about their depression or anxiety with you or a professional than talk directly about their substance use. This can be a way for them to get some kind of help that can ultimately lead to positive changes in their alcohol/drug use.

6. Try Immediate Rewards

Substance use disorders affect biological functioning, dominating the brain's reward system, affecting emotional regulation, motivation, impulse control, and pleasure-seeking behaviors. The brain and body become dependent on an outside substance to create feelings of happiness and well-being—and, at advanced stages of the disease, to simply maintain the ability to function.

Compulsive behaviors and the need for rapid reward are likely to surface and intensify as the substance use disorder progresses. Even when an individual detoxifies from a substance, the reward system in the brain can remain changed for a long period of time.

New research is suggesting that due to these changes in the brain, immediate rewards may be a more effective means by which to promote early recovery and your partner's sobriety. Instead of planning long-term incentives such as a vacation the following year, try planning small immediate rewards each day, and around upcoming weekends, for any

positive changes (e.g., keeping to a boundary [see above], talking openly about problems, attending a therapy session etc.).

The immediacy and consistency of positive rewards for any movement in a healthy direction has been shown to shape behavior in addictive individuals that can increase the odds of recovery.

7. Be Patient

Expect recovery, but be prepared for relapse. Although some individuals achieve long-term recovery on their first attempt, for others, it may take multiple attempts over multiple years. Keep your hopes up, as substance use disorder is known as a "good prognosis disorder" in that the majority of people can and do recover.

8. Stay Safe

Sometimes, no matter what you do to support your partner, their substance use has progressed to the point where they are unable to make rational decisions to cease their substance use. It may be necessary to seek legal assistance to save your loved one's life. Partners can look into civil commitment laws (e.g. sectioning) within their state, to explore involuntarily sending your partner to treatment. If you feel like you may be in danger of harm, or feel that your relationship is no longer healthy, it may be necessary to seek an end to the relationship.