

When Someone You Love is Addicted: How You Can Help

Addiction is a family disease—it affects each family member. If you are reading this, you are likely seeking guidance on what helps and what doesn't help a loved one who is addicted. The following are some recommendations that may help. . .

1. Start with Yourself

This may not make sense because it seems you are not the one with a problem—your loved one is the addict. But in every situation we need to begin with ourselves and realize that the addict's behavior has impacted us. We all respond differently to the craziness that comes with addiction. Some people get angry, some are filled with fear, some just avoid the person. Begin looking at yourself and how the addiction has impacted you.

- A. Consider how you have behaved in the past as it relates to your loved-one. Determine if you have or haven't had healthy boundaries with your loved one. Examine if and how you may have enabled your loved-one? Perhaps you have threatened but not followed through. Perhaps you have excused or blamed others when it really was your loved one's responsibility. Have you bailed him/her out of jail or paid for attorneys' fees instead of making them take that responsibility? Have you lied for them? Have you covered up for them with other family members? Make a list of the things you did (even though you likely did these things thinking you were helping).
- B. Once you have gotten honest about your behaviors as it relates to your addicted loved-one, now it's time to clarify what you value. Getting clear about your values helps you to make decisions easier, especially in tumultuous times. Be as specific as possible and take your time doing this exercise. It will prove invaluable down the road. For instance, if your personal value system holds honesty in high regard, then you know that no matter what happens, you will not lie. List your values.
- C. Explore your boundaries regarding what you have done in the past and what you will or will not do in the future. Consider the potentially challenging situations that could arise and plan, in advance, what you are going to do. Of course you can't plan for everything but this exercise will help you think through the decision making process. For instance, if your loved one is intoxicated and insists on driving, are you willing to call the police? If your loved-one calls from jail asking you to bail him/her out, will you tell them no?
- D. Now you're ready to write out your plan. Choose a starting date and list what you will and will not do. Be thorough. Remember, it is far more harmful to threaten things and then not follow through so be sure you are ready to follow your plan.



2. Discuss with Your Loved-One

Meet with your loved one (preferably in a public location with one other person present). It's important to have a safe environment to talk over these things and a public location will help prevent outbursts that may happen if you are at home.

- A. First, own your role in the situation. Tell him/her what you discovered as you reviewed how you've handled their addiction. Take ownership of any enabling, blaming or rescuing you may have done. Ask for forgiveness and commit to changing in the future. For example, if in the past you have rescued your son from natural consequences of his bad choices, recognize you chose to do this thus he didn't fully experience the consequences. Admit to him that you realize what you have done in the past and are committed to not repeating that behavior. It may be helpful to have your thoughts written out as this can be highly emotional.



- B. Tell your loved-one what you value and if you have acted in opposition to your values with regard to his/her addiction. Explain what you are committed to doing differently going forward. For instance, you may admit you've bailed them out of jail several times but that is against your values because they are continuing to drive drunk. Therefore, you will no longer bail them out—no matter what the situation is.

It's important to understand boundaries and be respectful of each person's rights. Each person has a right to ask someone for help but the other person has a right to say no. Remember, you have a right to your safety and your boundaries. IF there is a difference of opinion, you can simply agree to disagree and re-state your stand on the issue.

- C. Acknowledge the difficulties your loved one faces daily in recovery and recognize any progress. Confirm your love for them, and admit that you can't empathize completely but want to offer healthy support. Express belief in your loved one's potential for success if they really want to be successful at sobriety, and state that you respect their responsibility to live their own life.

- D. Respond to your loved-one's addiction as you would with anyone else who had a chronic medical disease. Be supportive but hold them accountable for their choices in dealing with their illness. Occasionally inquiring about their program is thoughtful but continual reminders or questions are not helpful.



- E. Environment has a big impact on people. Choosing to provide your loved-one a sober environment by ridding the home of any alcohol can be a hugely supportive step. Many loved ones say, "It's their problem, it doesn't mean I can't drink" which is entirely true. However, this is a chronic illness and many people cannot be around alcohol for the first few years. It may require deciding which you want more, the alcohol or the relationship?

3. Self-Care

Throughout this whole process you have to elevate the importance of taking care of yourself.

- A. Educate yourself on addiction and recovery. I can't stress this enough. There is an abundance of information available online regarding addiction, the effects of different drugs, issues of codependency, and how to cope. Just be certain to read information from credible, trained providers. The more you understand the disease, the more you will understand how to interact well with your loved one.
- B. Get involved with a healthy group of people who face similar situations. Perhaps there is a local Alanon group you could attend, or a Christ-based program like Celebrate Recovery. If you believe the group you found is safe, be willing to be vulnerable and share what you are going through. Remember that you do not need to follow anyone's advice. How you choose to act is completely your decision. Self-awareness is paramount when difficult situations like addiction, are present. Sometimes it is simply helpful to hear stories and perspectives of others going through a similar situation.
- C. Intentionally design your days to include self-care. Everyone is different so there is no blanket prescription for healthy self-care. Some common suggestions are to eat healthy, exercise, get proper rest, and find a support system. I recommend recognizing what is soothing or nurturing to you. Some people feel better listening to music, taking a bath, watching a movie, reading a book, doing crafts, visiting with friends, or doing some sort of service project. Now more than ever it is important to be intentional to elevate self-care.
- D. Even if your loved-one is getting help and doing better, remember that it takes a long time to change engrained behaviors. Build your recovery/self-care program while your loved-one is working on their own recovery.



Resources:

There are many resources available. The list below is not all inclusive and does not represent my recommendation. It is simply a place to start. I have no relationship with any of the following individuals or companies.

1. How AL-Anon Works: for families & friends of Alcoholics by AL-Anon Family Groups
2. Alcoholics Anonymous. www.aa.org and www.al-anon.org
3. Narcotics Anonymous. www.nar-anon.org
4. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. www.SAMHSA.gov
5. Families Anonymous. www.familiesanonymous.org.
6. Facing Codependency by Pia Mellody
7. Codependent No More by Mellody Beattle
8. The Christian Codependency Workbook by Stephanie Tucker
9. Boundaries by Henry Cloud and John Townsend
10. How People Change by Henry Cloud and John Townsend