

ADDICTION

Helping Someone with a Drug Addiction

Does someone you love have a drug problem? Whether it's illegal substances or prescription medication, you can't force anyone to stop abusing drugs. But there are ways to support their recovery.

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The effects of drug abuse and addiction on family and friends

Witnessing someone you care about battle a substance use disorder can be extremely distressing and take a heavy toll on your own mental and emotional well-being. Whether the drug abuser is a close friend, spouse, parent, child, or other family member, it's easy for their addiction to take over your life. It can pile stress upon stress, test your patience, strain your bank balance, and leave you racked by feelings of guilt, shame, anger, fear, frustration, and sadness.

You may worry about where your loved one is at any given time, their risk of overdosing, or the damage they're doing to their health, future, and home life. You may be in debt from paying their living expenses, the cost of legal troubles resulting from their drug abuse, or from failed attempts at rehab and recovery. You may also be worn down by covering for your loved one at home or work, having to shoulder the responsibilities they neglect, or being unable to devote more time to other family, friends, and interests in your life.

As despairing as you may feel, you're not alone in your struggle. A Pew Research Center survey in 2017 found that nearly half of Americans have a family member or close friend who's been addicted to drugs. Across the Western world, the abuse of prescription pain relievers and tranquilizers has skyrocketed in recent years, creating a public health crisis. (Along with marijuana, they're now among the most frequently abused drugs.)

Whether the problem is with recreational drugs or prescription medications, drug abuse and addiction can affect people from all walks of life, wrecking families, tearing relationships apart, and destroying lives. But there is help available. While you can't force someone to tackle their addiction, your love, support, and patience can play a vital part in their recovery. With these guidelines, you can learn to support your loved one's efforts, set the necessary boundaries to preserve your own health and welfare, and find some stability for both yourself and your loved one.

Understanding your loved one's substance abuse

People start using drugs for a lot of different reasons. Many turn to substances to cope with the emotional pain of a mental health problem, such as depression, anxiety, or PTSD. Known as self-medicating, some people may be aware they have a mental health issue but are unable to find healthier ways of coping, while others remain undiagnosed and use drugs to manage specific symptoms.

Other people turn to drugs to change how they feel, to fit in, or to alleviate boredom or dissatisfaction with their lives. Then there are those whose substance abuse develops from a doctor's well-intentioned efforts to treat a medical condition. Of all the people prescribed opioids to relieve pain, for example, estimates suggest that more than a quarter will end up misusing the drug.

[\[Read: Opioid Addiction\]](#)

Whatever your loved one's reason for starting, though, not everyone who uses drugs develops a problem. While the exact causes of addiction aren't clear, genetics likely plays a role, along with environmental factors. While one person is able to use substances without detrimental effects, another finds even casual use quickly escalates into compulsion and addiction—a very dark hole from which they can feel powerless to emerge.

Recognizing drug abuse in a loved one

It's not always easy to recognize if a loved one is abusing drugs. In teens, for example, drug abuse can often resemble normal adolescent moodiness. Furthermore, there's no specific amount or frequency of use that indicates someone's drug use has become a cause for concern. Whether your loved one is using every day or every month, it's the adverse impact their drug abuse has on their life that indicates a problem.

[\[Read: Drug Abuse and Addiction\]](#)

Signs your loved one may have a substance use disorder include:

Experiencing problems at work, school, or home. They appear high more often, for example, and take more days away from work or school to compensate. Their work performance or school grades suffer, they neglect their responsibilities at home, and encounter more and more relationship difficulties. They may even lose their job, drop out of school, or separate from a long-term partner.

New health issues, such as changes in sleep schedule, often appearing fatigued or run-down, pronounced weight loss or weight gain, glassy or bloodshot eyes, and forgetfulness or other cognition problems. Depending on the type of drug they're abusing, they may also exhibit frequent sniffing, nosebleeds, or shaking.

Changes in their mood and behavior. Your loved one may be more secretive and lie about what they're doing, where they're going, or how much they're using. They may be quick to anger or lash out, especially if you try to talk to them about their drug use. Heavy drug users often lose interest in old hobbies, lack energy, and become more moody, withdrawn, and sad. They may even neglect their appearance and personal hygiene, and suffer withdrawal symptoms if deprived of their drug of choice.

Recurring financial problems. Your loved one may run up credit card debt to support their drug use, seek loans, or ask to borrow money without any solid reason. They may even steal money or valuables to sell for drugs.

Drug paraphernalia to look out for

You may also be able to spot a loved one's substance abuse through the new or increased presence of drug paraphernalia.

- Paper wraps, small pieces of cling film, and tiny plastic bags are used to store drugs.
- Rolling papers, pipes, bongs, or pierced plastic bottles or cans are often used to smoke drugs.
- Burnt foil, spoons, and syringes may indicate heroin use.
- Those abusing prescription medications may be renewing their prescriptions more frequently or have bottles of medication prescribed for someone else.

How to talk to someone about their drug abuse

Starting a conversation with someone about their drug addiction is never easy, but it's important you come from a place of compassion and understanding. Remember, no one sets out to become an addict. Drug abuse is often a misguided attempt to cope with painful issues or mental health problems. Stress tends to fuel addictive behavior, so criticizing, demeaning, or shaming them will only push your loved one away and may even encourage them to seek further comfort in substance abuse.

Discovering someone you love has a drug problem can generate feelings of shock, fear, and anger, especially if it's your child or teen who's using. These strong emotions can make communicating with a drug user even more challenging. So, it's important to choose a time when you're both calm, sober, and free of distractions to talk. Offer your help and support without being judgmental.

Don't delay. You don't have to wait for your loved one to hit rock bottom—to get arrested, lose their job, suffer a medical emergency, or publicly humiliate themselves—to speak out. The earlier an addiction is treated, the better.

Express your concerns honestly. Emphasize that you care for the person and are worried about their well-being. Offer specific examples of your loved one's drug-related behavior that have made you concerned—and be honest about your own feelings.

Listen. Even when you don't agree with the person, take the time to listen to what they have to say, without trying to argue or contradict them. The more your loved one feels heard, the more they'll see you as supportive, someone they can confide in.

Offer them information about how they can address their drug problem—whether that's calling a helpline, talking to a doctor or counselor, [entering a treatment program](#), or going to a group meeting such as SMART Recovery, or a 12-step program like [Narcotics Anonymous \(NA\)](#).

[\[Read: Overcoming Drug Addiction\]](#)

Be prepared for denial. Your loved one may become defensive or angry and refuse to discuss their drug use. Many people feel a sense of shame when confronted by their behavior and will try to deny they have a problem. Don't argue with them, just revisit the issue another time.

Avoid trying to lecture, threaten, bribe, or punish the person. Getting angry or making emotional appeals will likely only add to the user's feelings of guilt and reinforce their compulsion to use.

Don't expect a single conversation to fix the problem. This will likely be the first of many conversations you'll need to have regarding your loved one's drug use. There's no quick fix to overcoming addiction. It may take several conversations for them to even acknowledge they have a problem, the first step on the road to recovery.

Staging an intervention

Staging an intervention tends to be a last-ditch effort to make someone realize they need treatment. However, many addicts can react angrily when confronted by a group or feel their loved ones are ganging up on them.

If you decide to stage a family meeting or intervention, it's important everyone involved comes from the same place of compassion and understanding. This is not an excuse for people to vent their grievances about the addict's behavior or make them feel bullied or ashamed. The problem is the disease of addiction, not the person in its grip.

Supporting a loved one's addiction recovery

There's no one-size-fits-all solution to overcoming an addiction to drugs, and it's rarely a process that's quick or straightforward. While you can support your loved one and [encourage treatment](#), you can't force them to change or control their decision-making. Letting your loved one assume responsibility for their behavior and choices is an important step on their road to sobriety.

Adjust your expectations. Everyone is different. Recovery for one person may mean total abstinence from drugs. For another, it could mean cutting back or staying mostly drug-free. Being too rigid in your expectations can lead to disappointment and a sense of failure, even if your loved one finds stability in their life again.

Encourage your loved one to seek help. While some people are able to quit drugs on their own, the more help and support a person has, the better their chances of success. Offer to sit with your loved one while they call a helpline or accompany them to a doctor's appointment, counseling session, or [peer support group meeting](#).

Ensure they address any co-occurring issues. The problems that triggered your loved one's drug use in the first place will still be there once they get sober. If they turned to drugs to [self-medicate a mental health problem](#) such as anxiety or depression, they'll need to find healthier ways of coping with these issues without resorting to substance abuse. To achieve long-term recovery, it's vital they tackle both their addiction and their mental health issue at the same time.

[\[Read: Dual Diagnosis: Substance Abuse and Mental Health\]](#)

Help plan for triggers and cravings. Your loved one will need to find ways to [cope with drug cravings and triggers](#). You can help distract them with other activities or encourage them to learn how to ride out the urge,

but ultimately, they have to be responsible for their own sobriety.

Encourage them to explore new interests. Quitting drugs can leave your loved one with a lot of extra time to fill. To help them avoid slipping back into old habits, encourage them to develop new interests—ones that don't involve drugs but do add meaning to their life. Think [volunteering](#), taking up a new sport or hobby, enrolling in a class, or spending time in nature hiking or camping, for example—anything that doesn't generate a trigger to use.

Accept the likelihood of relapse. Despite your efforts and your loved one's best intentions, the truth is that recovery often involves relapse. If that happens, encourage the person to recommit to getting clean and support them as they try again. Try to stay patient. Each relapse is an opportunity for your loved one to learn from their mistakes and find a new way forward.

Treatment options

Treatment can take place at home, as a hospital outpatient, or in a residential facility or sober living community. While it can vary according to the type of drug your loved one is addicted to, their age, and any other issues they're facing, most [treatment plans](#) include some of the following elements:

- ➔ **Detox** to purge the body of drugs, manage withdrawal symptoms, and achieve stability.
- ➔ **Treatment** for any co-occurring mental health problems.
- ➔ **Counseling**, whether it's individual, group, or family [therapy](#)—or a combination of all three—to tackle the root cause of the drug use and learn better ways of coping.
- ➔ **Medication** to help with withdrawal or treat any co-occurring disorders.
- ➔ **Ongoing peer support** meetings, such as a 12-step program, to keep the recovery on track and maintain sobriety.

[\[Read: Choosing Drug Rehab and Addiction Treatment\]](#)

Setting healthy boundaries

When someone you love has a problem with drugs, it's easy to fall into the trap of shielding them from the consequences of their addiction. Referred to as “enabling”, you may cover up for the person, take over their responsibilities, put their feelings before your own or other family members', rearrange your life to accommodate their addiction, or provide financial assistance when they're unable to pay bills or get into legal trouble because of their drug use.

While it may seem that you're being supportive, enabling your loved one will only help maintain their addiction—and damage your own health and well-being along the way. Of course, it can be extremely hard to say “no” to someone you love, especially if it's your child, but protecting the person from the consequences of their drug abuse often means you're removing the motivation for them to seek help and change.

To better help someone with a drug addiction, it's often necessary to hold them accountable for their actions by establishing limits or boundaries for what is and isn't acceptable behavior. Without boundaries, your loved one

never has to face the consequences of their actions—and you'll eventually feel burned out from all the attempts to cover up, excuse, or compensate for their behavior.

Establishing boundaries for a loved one abusing drugs could include:

- Not allowing drug use, drug paraphernalia, or other drug users in the home.
- Not covering up for them if they miss work or school, not lying to get them out of trouble, or not taking over any responsibilities they've neglected.
- Requiring they pay their share of rent and other bills on time.
- Refusing to give them money to pay off debts or cover legal expenses if they're arrested.
- Insisting that they always treat you with respect, even when high.

How to set boundaries—and stick to them

- 01. Talk to your loved one about boundaries** at a time when you're both calm and not under the influence of drugs. Clearly outline what behavior you will and will not tolerate and what the consequences will be if they break your rules.
- 02. Follow through.** It's almost inevitable that someone with an addiction will test any limits you set, so be prepared to follow through. If you don't enforce the consequences you've outlined, your loved one will know the boundaries are worthless and their destructive behavior will continue.
- 03. Remind yourself why you're doing this.** No one wants to see someone they care about suffer, but a meaningful, respectful relationship cannot exist without boundaries. Having to face the negative consequences of their behavior could be the impetus your loved one needs to get clean.

Establishing financial boundaries

In addition to the heavy emotional costs, money problems can also mount for families of drug abusers. Heavy drug use can be expensive, as can the cost of rehab and resolving legal problems stemming from your loved one's drug dependency. It's not uncommon for spouses to lose their homes bankrolling their loved one's addiction, parents to empty their retirement accounts bailing their child out of debt, or for other family members to max out their credit cards paying for costly rehab programs.

That doesn't make cutting off your loved one any easier. When setting financial boundaries, it's important to consider how far you're willing to go. For example, are you willing to see your loved one spend time in jail instead of covering their legal fees? Are you willing to see them evicted or living on the street instead of paying their living expenses?

While setting boundaries won't cure your loved one of their drug addiction or guarantee they seek help, neither will spending money. If your loved one chooses not to address their addiction, it won't matter how much money you spend trying to change that. Ultimately, all you can control is how well you look after your own health and welfare.

Taking care of yourself

Your loved one's recovery from drug addiction can be a long process and the negative impact on your own health, outlook, and well-being can multiply over time. It's important you maintain a balance in your life to avoid [burnout](#) from all the stress and frustration that comes from helping someone get clean.

Find support. Expressing what you're going through can be very cathartic, so look for support from trusted friends and family, or a peer support group for family members of drug addicts. Talking to others who are facing similar challenges can help you find comfort, reassurance, and new ways of coping.

Manage stress. The stress of witnessing someone you love battle addiction can take a heavy toll. You can reduce your stress levels by eating right, [exercising regularly](#), sleeping well, and practicing a [relaxation technique](#) such as yoga, deep breathing, or meditation. Since stress levels can escalate when quitting drugs, you can even encourage your loved one to do the same.

[\[Listen: Eye of the Storm Meditation\]](#)

Practice acceptance. At some point, you've probably asked yourself "Why me?" or even blamed yourself for your loved one's struggle with addiction. But dwelling on circumstances outside your control will only sap your energy and damage your mood. Instead of searching for someone to blame or asking questions with no easy answers, learning to [accept the things you can't change](#) can help you focus on the things that you do have control over.

Maintain other interests and relationships. It's easy for your loved one's battle with addiction to become all-consuming. But you'll find it easier to cope with a difficult situation when other areas of your life are rewarding. Set aside time in your day to pursue activities and relationships that bring you joy—and try to keep up with work, hobbies, and social plans.

Support for sufferers of substance use disorders

In the U.S.	Call the SAMHSA helpline at 1-800-662-4357.
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UK	Find NHS drug addictions support services or call the Frank helpline at 0800 776600.
Canada	Download the PDF Finding Quality Addiction Care from the Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction.
Australia	Find support or call the Alcohol and Drug Foundation helpline at 1800 250 015.

Support for families and loved ones

For parents in the U.S.: [Get One-on-One Help to Address Your Child's Substance Use](#) or call the Partnership for Drug-Free Kids helpline at 1-855-378-4373.

[Nar-Anon](#), a 12-Step Program for Family & Friends of Addicts, with worldwide chapters and online support groups.

[SMART Recovery](#) offers online and in-person support worldwide for family and friends.

Group and 12-step programs for your loved one (most have worldwide chapters)

[SMART Recovery](#)

[Narcotics Anonymous](#)

[Cocaine Anonymous](#)

[Crystal Meth Anonymous](#)

[Marijuana Anonymous](#)

More Information

Helpful links

01. [Intervention: Help a loved one overcome addiction](#) - Tips on holding a successful intervention. (Mayo Clinic)

02. [Coping When a Parent Has an Alcohol or Drug Problem](#) - Help for teenagers and adolescents. (TeensHealth)
03. [Step by Step Guides to Finding Treatment for Drug Use Disorders \(PDF\)](#) - Guides for adults, teens, or those helping someone addicted to drugs. (National Institute on Drug Abuse)
04. [Effective Treatments for Opioid Addiction](#) - Medications used in the treatment of opioid addiction. (National Institute on Drug Abuse)
05. [What is Substance Abuse Treatment? A Booklet for Families](#) - Learn about treatment options and what you can do. (SAMHSA)
06. [How can prescription drug addiction be treated?](#) - Treatment options for prescription drug addiction including addiction to opioid painkillers. (National Institute on Drug Abuse)
07. [Overcoming Addiction: Find an effective path toward recovery](#) - Special health report from Harvard Medical School. (Harvard Health Publishing)

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