



caring for
someone with
an addiction

Not always there with you ...but always there for you

Caring for someone with an addiction

Living with someone who uses drugs or alcohol or has another addiction can be like living on a permanent rollercoaster. The emotional impact can be huge, distressing and confusing. This factsheet will help you to explore what is happening to you. It will also help you to explore the impact and influence you can have on the life of the person you are caring for.

How you entered this part of your life is often a moment that remains with you forever. It may have been that you had pushed the thought of someone you care having an addiction problem out of your mind for months before you let it in. Or maybe the person had always had an addiction but the impact on your life changed. Maybe their addiction has become worse and started to be a problem.

At one level having an addiction itself is not a problem, but it is once it starts to cause disruption to your life, every aspect of your life can be affected. From the day-to-day practical details through to your dreams for the future.

“We were totally exhausted - our son had turned into a stranger.”

Tips that may help you

1. Come face-to-face with reality

Learning how to deal with reality is the most important first step in “surviving” when you care for someone with an addiction. Although it may seem easier to stay in the “fantasy space” where you can continue to believe that things are going to magically get better, there is no such magic. Things will not get better just because you wish they would.

Coming face-to-face with reality means accepting that parts of your life may be out of control as a result of caring for someone who is engaging in addictive behaviours. These addictions can include mind-altering substances such as drugs and alcohol, as well as mood-altering addictions such as eating disorders, compulsive over-spending, being “glued” to the internet or gambling.

You may be feeling a constant, gnawing worry that you live with every day. You may find yourself being asked for money often, and feeling guilty if you say no. Perhaps you are watching everything you say and do, in order to “keep the peace”. Or you may be asked to do favours for them on a consistent basis, and you may not know how to say no.

Whatever your particular situation is, acceptance of what you are dealing with in your life is the first survival tip for caring for an addicted person.

“It’s so hard to deal with - it really helped to talk to other parents in the same situation.”

2. Stay healthy

There are effective ways to deal with an addict in your life, just as there are ways that are not only ineffective but can also be dangerous. Learning to distinguish between them can save you a lot of time and can also produce much healthier results for you and the person you care for. For example, learning how to set and maintain appropriate boundaries is a very important skill. You may need to explore the reasons why you have a problem doing that, and then learn some assertiveness techniques that will help you say “yes” when you mean yes, and “no” when you mean no.



“It’s one of the hardest things I have ever done and it’s so hard to get support - you feel so alone.”

Another way to keep yourself healthy while caring for an addict is to make sure you are looking after your own life and keeping a good balance with such things as work or volunteering, supportive friendships, fitness and good nutrition, and time for the fun activities that you enjoy.

3. You cannot control or “fix” another person, so stop trying!

The only person you have any control over is yourself. You do not have control over anything the person you care for does. Once you can really grasp the reality of this concept and live by it, your life will become much easier.

Think about the difference between what you can and can't change, and stop trying to control or "fix" anyone other than yourself.

4. Stop blaming the other person and become willing to look at yourself

As easy and tempting as it may be for you to blame the person you care for for your frustrations and stress, there is actually more value in exploring what you may be contributing to this situation, since that is the only thing you can really do anything about. For example, you might be keeping the addiction going by lending them money. Or perhaps you are always willing to be there to listen when they tell you all about the problems they are encountering as a consequence of their addictive behaviours.

5. Learn the difference between "helping" and "enabling."

Just like most people, you might think that you need to help the person you care for. You probably fear that if you don't provide help, he or she will end up in a worse predicament. When you try to "help" addicts by giving them money, allowing them to stay in your home, buying food for them on a regular basis, driving them places or going back on the healthy boundaries you have already set with them, you are actually engaging in "rescuing" behaviours that are not really helpful. Another term for this kind of unhealthy helping is "enabling."

When you can be as truthful as possible with yourself about your own enabling behaviours, you can begin to make different choices. For example, you might decide to tell the person you care for that you will no longer listen to them complain about their lives. However, you can let them know that you are very willing to be there for them as soon as they are ready to work on resolving their problems.



No.

6. Don't give in to manipulation

It has been said that the least favourite word for an addict to hear is “No.” When addicts are not ready to change, they become master manipulators in order to keep the addiction going. Their fear of stopping is so great that they will do just about anything to keep from having to be honest with themselves. Some of these manipulations include lying, cheating, blaming, raging and guilt-tripping others, as well as becoming depressed or developing other kinds of emotional or physical illnesses.

The more you allow yourself to be manipulated by the person you care for, the more manipulative they are likely to become. When you hold your ground and refuse to give into their unreasonable demands, they will eventually realize that they are not going to get their way.

Saying “no” is an important first step toward change — for you, as well as for the person you care for.



“Try to stay firm - it really is tough love”

“There is light at the end of the tunnel - it can just take a while to get there.”

7. Ask yourself the “Magic Question.”

It is important to understand that you might be just as “addicted” to your enabling behaviours as the person you care for is to his or her manipulations.

In the same way that addicts use drugs, alcohol and other addictive behaviours to avoid dealing with things, you may be focusing on their behaviour in order to avoid having to focus on living your own life. Your enabling behaviours may be helping to keep you busy and to fill up your life so that you don’t have to see how lonely and empty you are feeling inside.

Ask yourself the question: “How would my life be better if I wasn’t consumed by behaviours that enable the person I care for?” Allow yourself to answer honestly, and be aware of any feelings that come up.

Although it may be scary to think about giving up behaviours that have formed your “comfort zone,” it may be even more scary for you to think about continuing them.

8. Know that “Self-care” does not equal “selfish.”

Too many people get these two ideas confused: they think that if they practice healthy self-care and put themselves first, they are being selfish. “Selfishness” basically means that you want what you want when you want it, and you are willing to step on whoever

you have to in order to get it. That actually sounds more like the behaviour of an addict. If you try to take care of someone else before taking care of yourself, you will simply become depleted and exhausted.

“Self-caring” means that you respect yourself enough to take good care of yourself in healthy and holistic ways such as making sure your physical, mental, emotional and spiritual needs are met.

As an adult, it is your job to determine what your needs are, and you are the only one responsible for meeting them.

9. Rebuild your own life.

The best way to come out of your own “addictive behaviours,” such as enabling and people-pleasing, is to focus on your own life. If your life seems empty in any areas such as work, relationships or self-care, begin to rebuild your life by exploring the kinds of things that might fulfill you. Would you like to make a career change or go to college? Perhaps you would like to develop different hobbies or activities that would help you meet new people.

10. Don't wait until the situation is really bad - reach out for help NOW!!

When carers finally reach out for help, they have usually been dealing with their situation for a long time. If you are waiting to see whether things get better without professional help, please consider



getting help NOW, before things become even worse.

If this situation is just beginning for you, it is best to get some support as soon as possible, so that you don't make the mistakes that could make things more difficult.

The sooner you reach out for help, the better it is for everyone concerned.





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