

Understanding the Impact of Substance Use Disorder on Families: Unraveling the Dynamics

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Substance use disorder (SUD) within a family system typically presents as a syndrome involving a predictable set of maladaptive responses to the progressive symptoms of the person with substance use disorder. Other family members, affected by their loved one's SUD, engage in purposeful behavior, trying to keep the family afloat and maintain some semblance of "normalcy." They try to maintain equilibrium to reduce the distress in the system while trying to solve the problem of the SUD in its loved one.

Families dealing with a member's substance use disorder, similar to those facing chronic illnesses, often revolve around the affected individual. One member's substance use disorder (SUD) significantly affects every other family member-- directly or indirectly. Each person in that system has their way of dealing with the problem. Often, the ways that individual family members cope with the dysfunction in the system either create or exacerbate their mental, emotional, physical, or spiritual health issues. There is a bidirectional relationship between the identified family member (with SUD) and the other members of the system. Each part affects every other part of a system.

Substance use disorder creates dysfunction in the family system in several ways. In the earlier days of SUD, family members notice something is not quite right, but it may take a while before they realize that SUD is wreaking havoc with their family. Denial, incorrect identification of the problem, and other defenses may keep them in the dark for some time. All the while, family members are trying to figure out what is happening. Trying to solve the problem of the SUD of the beloved family member often involves actions that unintentionally support or enable substance use by covering up for their behavior, providing money for alcohol, or making excuses for their actions.

Relationships become skewed as other family members become overly focused on the needs and well-being of the loved one with SUD, to their detriment.

Arguments, blaming, and other coercive communication attempts occur when trying to problem-solve. Communication problems develop as family members refrain from discussing the SUD.

The erratic, chaotic, unpredictable behavior that often characterizes SUD can lead to instability of the system and significant distress of family members. Sometimes, the emotional pain of family members presents as social isolation and withdrawal, obsessive-compulsive behavior, loss of sense of self and personal boundaries, and mental, emotional, and physical health symptoms.

Substance use disorder is progressive. The disability experienced by the person with SUD and the dysfunctional adjustment of other family members is escalating.

In the early days of substance use disorder, everyone was pretty oblivious to the potential problems headed their way. As substance use disorder progresses, the person's relationship with the chemical (alcohol and other drugs) changes. The relationship takes on more and more importance in the loved one's life, leading to many progressively problematic behaviors such as over-investment in money, time, and energy in getting the chemical, using it, and recovering from it. This shift in priorities usually involves neglect of self, others, and responsibilities.

When family members correctly identify the problem, they typically shift their focus from their own life to trying to fix the loved one's predicaments.

They try to reason and logic. Having failed, they try to shame, guilt trip, and manipulate. The family member with substance use disorder does not see things as other family members do. Their relationship with the chemical keeps morphing, and eventually, the chemical, once just part of having fun, has taken on a life of its own. The chemical is now "the solution" to whatever ails them, and the family has determined that the chemical is "the problem" and is trying to take away their best friend.

The family and the person with a pathological relationship with the chemical engage in a war over the chemical. The issue of drinking or

using becomes a battleground, on which all conflicts over power and control are "won" or "lost." Each side believes that the other side is trying diligently to control them. Each side wants to be accepted and understood. Each side wants the stress, pain, and tension to stop. They are battling it out over how to accomplish it.

The battles, the resentment, and the chaos that SUD creates in the family lead to compulsive behavior among the other family members and turn into a stereotyped group of survival behaviors. Each person in the system is trying to adapt to the changes in the system with the least amount of personal stress.

Attitudes, beliefs, and expectations become fixed, leaving little room for empathy, creative problem-solving, and trying something new. Family members, including the loved one with SUD, think that if everyone would just come around to their way of thinking, they would be able to solve all the problems. Everyone is invested in their solution and cannot fathom an alternative way of thinking or behaving. These compulsive responses reinforce cognitive distortions and perpetuate defensiveness and self-delusion. Family members adapt by repressing uncomfortable feelings or acting them out. They live trapped in their distorted sense of reality -- just like the person with active SUD.



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Signs & Symptoms of Substance Use Disorder: How to Know if Your Loved One Needs Help

We all know that Substance Use Disorder (SUD) has a profound impact the individuals caught in its grip and the family members that love them.

In this Brief Lesson, we describe the physical signs indicating excessive drinking or drug use. We also note the importance of paying close attention to the changes they may be undergoing. SUD can lead to significant alterations in behavior, routines, physical well-being, mental health, financial stability, and relationships.

With the ability to recognize these signs and symptoms, you may be able to address the issue before it spirals into catastrophic consequences. Learn all you can about SUD. [Start here.](#)