

Understanding the Impact Of Active Addiction On Marriage

By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.

Being married to a person with substance use disorder is a challenging and painful life. Spouses of people who have alcohol or drug problems typically experience a wide variety of uncomfortable emotions, maladaptive coping behavior, and psychological issues. Spouses often feel angry, hurt, sad, lonely, helpless, grief, shame, and guilty. Their maladaptive behavior usually involves a continuum of behavior between shutdown, withdrawal and isolation and compulsively trying to be everything to everybody. It usually involves compulsively trying to make the spouse with substance use disorder quit using. It may involve a lot of self-sacrifice and ultimately loss of self. Most of the techniques that spouses try to regain control over their lives and their well-being of their family ends up worsening their self-efficacy and self-esteem, along with facilitating an environment of conflict. The compulsive tug-of-war over the chemical perpetuates conflict and hostility and may endanger the physical safety of family members. Some family members take a “cooperative, tolerant approach,” which involves acquiescence to avoid conflict and fighting.

It is also a perfect setup for conflict and pain. The spouse and the person struggling with substance use are operating under a distorted view of reality. Substance use disorder often involves self-centered and selfish behavior, along with shame and self-loathing. They may demand "respect" in one breath, and proclaim that their family would be better off without them in the next.

The spouse is trying all manner of problem-solving behavior to keep the family together.

The non-addicted spouse, meanwhile, feels abandoned, abused, and traumatized by the chaos. They are left to pick up the slack caused by the

abdication of responsibility from the person with substance use disorder. They may be running around like a chicken with their head cut off, doing all the cooking, cleaning, child-rearing, and other responsibilities, all while keeping a wary eye on the out-of-control drug using behavior.

The well-defended substance using spouse does not see the struggle of the non-addicted spouse. They usually feel unappreciated in their endeavors and firmly believe they contribute to the household. They both feel misunderstood, hurt, criticized, and rejected, and both people gather up resentment daily. Open, direct hostility and a sense of hopelessness usually exist. Each partner is often working at cross-purposes with the other. The person with substance use disorder is typically trying to use drugs or alcohol without consequences, while the non-addicted spouse is trying to force them to stop using. The harder they try, the more stereotyped their interactions. They get locked into a tug-of-war over the chemical.

Secrecy, lying, manipulation, social isolation, shame, and guilt are all by-products of the struggle. Small issues that were once minor differences can become divisive regarding parenting styles, attitudes about child responsibility, and other fundamental differences. If the spouses are locked into battle with each other, they may not even deal with addiction as an issue, yet the problem will still pervade every argument, conflict, and event where hurt feelings are involved.

The stress of the tug of war, constant conflict and tension, and chaos take a toll on everyone. The person with substance use disorder is medicated. The other person is acutely aware of every feeling, every threat, and every maladaptive response to the relationship dynamics. They often experience health problems due to the relationship dynamics and stress of the negative consequences of addiction. They also employ poor decision-making when they can make decisions. They tend to second-guess themselves and buy into their psychologically well-defended spouse's claims that they are crazy.

This struggle can continue for years or decades as each partner continually threatens to leave. They do not consider it a possibility or a feasible course of action. This struggle becomes compulsive. While the

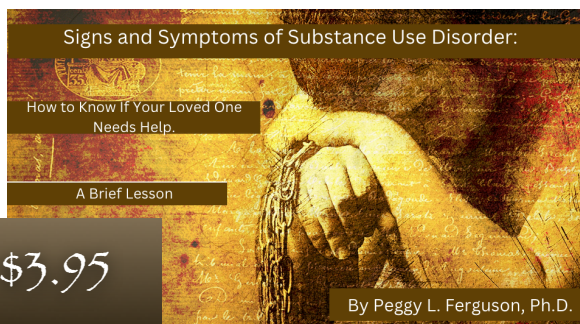
threat is a dirty fight tactic, the relationship is forever on the verge of collapse. Either party may eventually give up and leave. The non-addicted spouse acknowledges that their efforts to make their partner change have led to unmanageability in their own life and a change in personality to someone they don't even like. The person with an addiction will often leave, so they may continue to drink or use unencumbered. The threat hangs in the air, feeding resentment and despair.

Leaving may motivate a fundamental change because it presents a crisis. Crises are also opportunities for growth because they involve fear and pain, which are good short-term motivators. If the non-addicted spouse leaves, the person with substance abuse disorder may try to "make a deal" to win them back. The compromise with changing behavior often seems insufficient to accomplish recovery.

It's crucial to understand that the person trying to change does not know how to get and stay sober. There is often general confusion about the value of professional help and support groups. Most people with addiction and their non-addicted family members lack the knowledge to match treatment resources to the needs of the addicted. It is crucial to seek professional assessment for addiction and to follow recommendations.

The non-addicted spouse should seek help for themselves and stay engaged in that help, regardless of whether the addict seeks treatment. Left untreated, the non-addicted spouse will tend to remain vulnerable to marrying another person with substance use disorder after divorce. Help is needed to stop the cycle of addiction. Ultimately, addiction is not only a

family issue that requires professional support, compassion, and understanding but a mental and physical health issue for the non-addicted person.



Understanding Substance Use Disorder: A Brief Lesson on Recognizing the Signs and Symptoms Your Loved One May Need Help
Knowledge is power. Arm yourself with information about red flags—signaling possible substance abuse disorder. Be prepared to be proactive in dealing with substance use disorder in the family.