

Let Your Family Member Recover From Addiction: How the Family is in the Way

By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.

Families often find themselves in a difficult position when a loved one struggles with addiction to alcohol or other drugs (AOD). It's natural for family members to want to help and protect their loved ones, but often, their efforts can unintentionally exacerbate the situation.

The initial instinct for many family members is to try everything in their power to prevent their loved one with substance use disorder from using those substances. They may feel a deep sense of responsibility for their well-being and believe they can somehow control or fix the problem. However, this approach often leads to frustration and conflict within the family.

As the addiction progresses, family members may feel like they're engaged in a constant battle with their loved one. They may try to anticipate their next move, hoping to intervene before they can use substances again. This cycle of control and resistance can create a tense and emotionally charged environment for everyone involved. Addiction carries a series of crises that progressively get more intense and closer together. Family members, in their attempts to problem solve, often rescue their loved one from the negative consequences of their drinking or drug use. Removing those consequences also removes the motivation to change, resulting from discomfort and pain. Many times, it's a family member's quandary about stepping up to solve the problem because the problem, in all its negative consequences, also affects the family. However, there are often solutions for the impact on the family that do not overly enable the person with substance use disorder.

Family members need to recognize that addiction is a complex and multifaceted issue. While their intentions may be rooted in love and concern, their attempts to control their loved one's behavior can inadvertently enable their addiction as their loved one comes to view the tug of war for the chemical as "the struggle," losing sight of their struggle with the chemical. Ultimately, everyone feels guilt, resentment, and helplessness.

Instead of focusing on trying to prevent their loved one from using substances, family members can offer support and encouragement in their journey toward recovery. Support and encouragement may involve setting boundaries, practicing self-care, and seeking guidance from addiction professionals. It can also include being "responsible to" your loved one rather than "for them." Just remember that it is not a betrayal to take care of yourself amid your loved one's illness. It is much easier to get out of power struggles when you proactively manage your stress, take care of yourself, and consciously and deliberately decide how to respond (rather than react) to high-stress situations.

Above all, family members need to remember that they are not alone in this struggle. Addiction affects the entire family unit, and seeking support from others who have been through similar experiences can provide comfort and guidance along the way. Family members who engage in their own recovery from the family dynamics of addiction are more likely to see their addicted loved one make it to recovery. By approaching the situation compassionately, family members can play a crucial role in supporting their loved one's transition into recovery. **Note: This article has been revised and edited from its original version, which was previously published in 2009 on this site. The content has been updated for contemporary language, clarity and accuracy.**



Please check out all the pages on my site. There are many resources for families struggling with their loved one's substance use disorder. - *Peggy*