

Giving Up The Battle: Empowering Spouses Living with Addiction To Take Control Over Their Own Lives

By Peggy L. Ferguson Ph.D.

Living with a partner struggling with substance use disorder can be overwhelming. The chaos and strain on relationships are everyday experiences shared by many spouses dealing with addiction. Understand the dynamics and seek professional help to navigate this challenging journey. Here's an exploration of the typical struggles faced by spouses of individuals with substance use disorder.

The Impact of Substance Use Disorder on Relationships

Frequently, I encounter heart-wrenching stories from spouses of those battling addiction. As the addiction takes hold, the non-addicted spouse often finds themselves shouldering the burden of responsibilities abandoned by their partner. This shift triggers negative consequences in their lives, including finances, relationships, careers, parenting, legal matters, and spirituality.

The Struggle for Control

Recognizing the problem, the spouse attempts to intervene, but the person disabled by the substance use disorder is unable to regain control over their use. Intervention attempts by the non-addicted spouse feeling the weight of the addict's irresponsibility, becomes increasingly angry and controlling. Attempts to make the substance-using spouse "act right" set the stage for an ongoing power struggle. Neither spouse can see each other's viewpoint.

Both parties operate under distorted views of reality. The spouse who is suffering because of their substance use oscillates between self-centeredness and self-loathing. Someone who has a problematic substance use problem and won't or can't quit is engaged in an obsessive-compulsive relationship with the chemical. The non-addicted spouse is involved in an obsessive-compulsive relationship with the afflicted spouse and their relationship to the chemical, attempting to control and fix the perceived problem.

The Battleground of Addiction

Living with addiction transforms the home into a battleground, marked by secrecy, lies, manipulation, social isolation, and distorted emotions. Issues beyond substance use become part of the conflict, with once-minor differences turning into significant divides. Minor differences in parenting styles, for example, can polarize spouses, further escalating conflicts and straining the relationship.

Coercive Struggles for Control

Both parties engage in coercive efforts to control, perpetuating a cycle of conflict. While the person with a substance use disorder desires uninterrupted substance use, the spouse desperately wants them to recognize the impact on the family and quit. This clash leads to a prolonged struggle where each party seeks to assert dominance, often to the detriment of their relationship.

The Path to Recovery

Recognizing the need for change, the non-addicted spouse may contemplate leaving and threaten to do so for years. The beginning of recovery for the spouse happens when they are able to see their lack of consistent control over their spouse's substance use disorder and acknowledge the unmanageability of their own life. Continuing to try everything in the book to change another person or to motivate them to

change creates an unmanageability of the spouse's life. They can get to the point where they aren't living their own life; they are repeatedly acting the same scenes of a well-rehearsed stage play--day after day.

When spouses decide to let go of control of the addiction for their loved one, they can once again have a life without continuous trauma. If the decision to leave the marriage is motivated by a desire to care for themselves and their children, it won't be a threat. It will be a bottom line.

When people with substance use disorders face an actual bottom line, it could create a big enough crisis that they may become motivated to seek help. Keep in mind that leaving a spouse with substance use disorder does not necessarily lead them to abstinence. People with addictions often only seek help after the loss of several marriages because of their substance problems. Spouses, desperate to make them get help, may think that leaving will do the trick. It may not. If you are going to leave the marriage, leave for your survival and sanity.

Seek Help

Spouses living with the drama and trauma of active addiction can bravely prioritize their well-being, seeking help and remaining engaged in their recovery, irrespective of whether their spouse seeks treatment.



Signs and Symptoms of Substance Use Disorder: How to Know If Your Loved One Needs Help," by Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D., is a concise and insightful Brief Lesson for anyone concerned about a loved one's well-being. This presentation identifies signs and symptoms of SUD and teaches practical strategies for approaching and supporting a loved one battling addiction. Equipping yourself with the knowledge and resources to guide your loved one toward the professional help and treatment necessary for their recovery journey is paramount. This lesson is for anyone who loves someone struggling with substance use. It is an invaluable tool for building awareness and fostering a path towards healing and recovery.

\$2.95 This is a digital download