

Help and Support for The Spouse: Is Your Spouse's Addiction Killing You?

By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.

"My spouse is killing me with their addiction. They don't help with anything, not even picking up after themselves. They won't work, yet they spend all the money. They are never at home, but when they come home, they're drunk and agitated and bossing everyone around. I feel so angry that I want to hurt them."

These are words I hear all the time from family members of individuals with active addiction, whether it is alcohol or other drugs. Substance use disorder in a family member can create family dynamics of hostility, hopelessness, and helplessness. The dynamics and experiences of the person with addiction and the spouse are essentially the same for both genders. The individual and family dynamics of addiction and recovery are very predictable.

Of course, the spouse is angry. They are picking up all the slack caused by the loved one's addiction. The person with the substance use disorder, of course, does not see it that way. They perceive their significant contribution to the household and the family as unappreciated.

Both are operating under a distorted view of reality. The afflicted loved one's behavior may appear self-centered and narcissistic. Inside, they feel ashamed and self-loathing. They sometimes demand "respect" in one breath and then lament that the family would be better off without them.

They feel hurt and angry about the spouse's attempts to control, parent, manipulate, and, above all, try to get in the way of their drug use. The spouse feels hurt and angry about the loved one's continued use despite all the problems caused by it, their failure to cooperate with the game plan, and the emotional absence from the family.

They are working at cross-purposes. The person with the problematic substance use "just" wants to use in peace without the natural negative consequences of that drug use. The family member "just" wants their loved one to wise up, see what they are doing to themselves and the family, and quit using.

The loved one is engaging in an obsessive-compulsive relationship with the chemical. The is engaging in an obsessive-compulsive relationship with the afflicted loved one. Spouses see that "the chemical is the problem," while someone with a substance use disorder views the problem as the "controlling spouse." Just as the person with addiction feels compelled by every fiber of their being to use their drug of choice, the spouse feels equally compelled to try to fix the problem. The problem, identified as the problematic chemical use, is not amenable to being fixed by the spouse.

Addiction is fraught with secrecy, lying, manipulation, social isolation and withdrawal, distorted feelings, and inappropriate ways of dealing with those feelings. Relationship issues, beyond problematic substance use, turn into a battlefield where they also struggle over drugs.

Things that were once minor differences become major chasms that divide and conquer. An example is parenting. Differences in "strictness" versus "leniency" will become polarized. If there is a conflict over a child's lack of responsibility, it will intensify. The more lenient spouse will compare their partner's lack of responsibility to the child's, considering the child's developmental stage, and view the strict parent as hypocritical and unreasonable.

They may or may not verbalize any of this, yet they will typically become more lenient to balance out the "unreasonable demands" of the chemically affected parent. The person with addiction views the spouse's behavior as undermining their authority and as another example of attempting to control everything. These spouses can be so locked into battle over issues like these that they don't even deal with the addiction as an issue. Yet it permeates every argument, every conflict, and every event where feelings are hurt. When they openly struggle over the addiction, they treat the

problems caused by it as equally significant as their usual arguments, each seeing the discussion as another example of how the other spouse is wrong. Each is engaged in coercive efforts to control. Many spouses stay engaged in that struggle over decades of addiction.

Although the spouse threatens to leave for years or decades, they do not (for a long time) genuinely consider it a possibility or a feasible course of action. The non-addicted spouse does, however, finally get to a point where they acknowledge to themselves that their attempts to fix the problem or save their loved one from their behavior have created a level of unmanageability in their lives that they can no longer live with and leave the relationship. By the time they mean it and can go, the beleaguered loved one won't believe them. The worn-out spouse has cried "wolf" too many times before. When the reality hits that they do mean it this time, it will typically create a crisis for the person with an addiction. Only a genuine decision to leave will create a crisis. A threat won't do it. It is a bottom line when someone abandons the relationship for survival, sanity, or happiness. That person is taking responsibility for themselves.

When spouses prioritize seeking help and implementing self-care strategies for themselves and their children, they initiate potent transformations. Seeking support and setting firm, self-responsible boundaries allow individuals to take back control of their lives, cultivating resilience and fostering personal growth and well-being. These proactive steps empower spouses to reclaim control over their narratives, fostering positive outcomes and a healthier environment for themselves and their families. **Note: This article has been revised and edited from its original version, which was previously published in 2009 titled, "Help and Support for the Spouse of the Alcoholic - Is Your Spouse's Alcoholism Killing You?" The content has been updated for contemporary language and concepts, clarity and accuracy.**



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