



Life Lines

Improving your quality of life, one step at a time

Issue #10: SUPPORTING THOSE WITH ADDICTION



One of the often-overlooked challenges with addiction is that the addicted individual is not the only person impacted by the disease. Family and friends may encounter difficulty with the individual's pattern of behaviour, potentially escalating financial and legal problems, and even just the daily struggle of providing positive reinforcement and support.

It is complicated and typically overwhelming for those impacted when the disease takes hold. Often, family members are unable to observe or note the signs and behaviours that signal addiction. This article offers advice on supporting someone you care about who is struggling with an addiction, no matter where they are in their recovery journey.

What are some indicators to watch for that might reveal addictions?

Often, when the condition is revealed, those close to the person wonder how they could have missed the signs. The fact is, addiction is not clear cut, especially if the addicted person intends to keep it secret or is genuinely unaware that they have a problem. While you should pay attention

to all behavioural changes, here are three indicators that you may be able to observe that could help to reveal addictions:

- **Absenteeism or avoidance.** Have you noticed a decline in attendance or withdrawal from social engagements and/or family events? Within a work setting, you may notice an increased use of sick leave, or variations in arrival and departure times. Additionally, you may notice prolonged breaks or extended absences.
- **Excuses.** Have you noticed overly elaborate explanations being offered when you check in or reach out to see how the individual is doing or if they missed an event they were expected to attend? This may be particularly difficult to notice given the increased amount of virtual or online engagements due to COVID-19.

- **Irresponsibility and recklessness.** Has the individual stopped performing specific roles and accountabilities? Are they making careless mistakes or missing key tasks or responsibilities that have significant repercussions?

What is addiction and what are the different types of addictions?

Addiction is a chronic disease distinguished by compulsive engagement in rewarding stimuli despite adverse consequences.¹ Research estimates that genetics account for 40 to 60 percent of a person's likelihood of developing a substance use problem or a compulsive habit.² An addiction heavily impacts the way a person thinks, feels and acts. When an addictive disorder has formed, people will pursue debilitating habits despite putting themselves or potentially others in harm's way. They may be aware of their problem but have difficulty stopping on their own despite consequences that could include job loss, injury, divorce, financial hardship or worse.

While dependence on drugs and alcohol are some of the most commonly experienced types of addictions,³ the disease can include compulsive engagement in behaviours like bingeing and purging food (eating disorders), sex, gambling and excess screen time or social media engagement.⁴

Five ways to support those with addiction, beyond talk therapy

Supporting someone through their addiction and subsequent treatment may not come as second nature, but there are ways you can help. Be sure to start by setting boundaries to ensure you protect yourself. It's important to remember that you can't support a person in need if you're not feeling stable yourself.⁵

1. Set boundaries

The boundaries you set should depend on your situation and the nature and intensity of the other person's addiction. Here are some examples to consider:

- Disallow drug or alcohol use when they are in your home.
- Refuse to bail them out of jail if the circumstance arises.
- Walk away from and report their physical abuse if applicable.
- Refuse to give them money or to provide any means that support the addiction.
- Refuse to cover for them, at work or in front of friends and family.

2. Education about addiction, relapse, co-dependence

If you are concerned about someone's addiction, it is best to have them assessed by an addiction medicine specialist or someone with a similar professional designation. As a starting point, you should obtain some resources for reliable information that can educate you on what your friend or family member is experiencing. While you may not be qualified to help someone with a severe disorder, you may be able to help them find the qualified and quality of addiction care needed.⁶

3. Build a support system

The support system could include friends, family, and members of a support group focused on addiction recovery. These groups often socialize and meet regularly. You can help by joining the visits, offering to drive them to scheduled meeting, and even just sitting and talking on the phone when in-person socializing isn't possible.

4. Build resilience

Exercising, building/maintaining financial health, self-care practices, working on emotional intelligence, and focusing on good interpersonal relationships are all great ways to build resilience so that the actions of the addicted person do not affect your emotional, financial, and social well-being.

5. Create a relapse plan

A relapse plan includes everything from relapse prevention tactics, like contacting someone from the support system or practicing disrupting dysfunctional thinking as it occurs,⁷ to more robust measures like in-patient treatment or overdose prevention.

How to help someone with addiction get the help they need

It may be helpful to get some individual counselling to assist both you and the person with the addiction. Counselling isn't just for the person with an addiction. The more you can manage, the better you will be able to help another person. There are a variety of resources to find counsellors.

- If the person is employed, investigate whether the company offers an Employee Assistance Program or a health insurance program for easier access to counselling services.

- Ask someone who has been through addiction treatment which local and/or regional programs worked for them.
- Investigate national programs and the various resources available.⁸
- For assistance with financial concerns or legal troubles, it may be helpful to talk to an attorney.
- Some organizations provide addiction and mental health services on a sliding scale fee.
- Local churches may also offer some low or no-cost counselling and/or support groups.

Four ways to support a person during addiction treatment

There are many ways to stand by someone's side during their addiction treatment without compromising your own well-being. Here are four of the main underpinnings for supportive actions when dealing with someone else's addiction recovery.

1. Get information about addictions

Knowledge is power and may help you understand more about yourself and how you fit into another person's addiction. Start by learning about the disease process of addiction and how it affects the life of the person you wish to support. You can also search for information about how addiction impacts family and friends and how they can set and maintain healthy boundaries.⁹

2. Understand the signs and symptoms of a relapse

Understanding addiction's chronic and cyclical nature will help deal with the signs of relapse and how to deal with a crisis. Only trained professionals should handle emergencies, but there are tools like Naloxone kits and emergency contacts that will help keep a relapse from turning into a fatal event.

3. Stand your ground, with compassion

It's not always easy to maintain healthy boundaries when your compassionate side wants you to do all you can to help someone recover from their addiction. Remember that their recovery isn't your responsibility, but your health and well-being are. Take care of yourself first so that you can be both strong and supportive.

4. Don't try to rescue the addict

Many addicted people cannot change until circumstances indicate they must. This often occurs when they experience the consequences of their disease. You can create several boundaries that will help, like committing to not financially supporting the addict or their addiction. Paying for things like groceries and rent may help, but it may also prolong the disease.



How to support someone during addiction recovery—building resilience and moving forward

Once a person is ready to move past addiction and into sobriety and a return to previous norms and rebuilding, they will need support in new ways. Here are a few ways to continue supporting an addict once they exhibit behaviours and patterns of recovery progress:

- Continue to maintain boundaries and hold them accountable for the expectations they made for their life and sobriety while in recovery.
- Engage in healthy, sober activities with them.
- If it is permitted, offer to attend a support group with them.
- Offer to drive them to appointments, meetings, job interviews, or social events.
- Don't expect addicts to keep every promise they make (they may not be able to do so) and don't respond with pity or anger when mistakes are made.
- Expect, but do not fear, that their recovery may come with relapse.
- Never lose hope for their recovery. Even if they have to return to treatment multiple times and sustain repeated relapses, if the person is willing to return to recovery they are worth your support.

Most importantly, focus on your own life and make sure that you are taken care of first. If you experience stress due to another's issues on top of your own, it creates resentment and strain. Think about joining a support group for family members of people with addiction. In such support groups, you should be able to find and connect with other people going through similar situations. As you start to share what you're going through, the group members should help you see that you are not alone in this and that taking care of your mental health is the best thing for building resiliency around a person with an addiction.¹⁰ By making sure you get exercise, plenty of sleep, and time to socialize and support, you are setting yourself up to help the person you care about as they progress in their recovery. Secondly, you will serve as a role model for the person who is recovering and looking for self-care skills to implement in their own life.

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