

How Can I Help Someone Who's Struggling With Addiction?

ASPIRE Impact Network Family Support Packet

INTRODUCTION

When someone you care about is struggling with addiction, it's natural to feel a complex mix of emotions—concern, frustration, helplessness, and hope. You want to help, but it's often difficult to know what will actually make a difference. Well-intentioned approaches can sometimes enable addiction or damage relationships rather than support recovery.

This packet provides practical guidance for supporting a loved one with addiction while also taking care of yourself. The information is based on research, clinical experience, and the wisdom of families who have navigated this challenging journey. Remember that while you cannot control another person's choices, your approach can significantly influence the environment in which they make those choices.

UNDERSTANDING ADDICTION

Before you can effectively help someone, it's important to understand what you're dealing with:

Key Facts About Addiction:

- **Addiction is a brain disorder**, not simply a choice or moral failing
- The brain's reward, motivation, and memory circuits are altered, making stopping extremely difficult
- **Recovery is possible**, but often requires professional help and support
- **Relapse is common** and should be viewed as part of the recovery process
- **Multiple factors contribute** to addiction, including genetics, environment, trauma, and mental health
- People rarely change until the pain of staying the same exceeds the pain of changing

COMMON MYTHS VS. REALITY OF ADDICTION	
MYTH	REALITY
People with addiction could stop if they	Addiction changes brain function, making "just

really wanted to	stopping" extremely difficult
Addiction is a moral failing or character flaw	Addiction is a complex health condition with biological, psychological, and social components
Helping means protecting them from consequences	Protecting from consequences often enables continued use
Love and willpower are enough to overcome addiction	Most people need professional treatment and ongoing support
You should wait until they "hit bottom"	Earlier intervention typically leads to better outcomes

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RECOGNIZING WHAT YOU CAN AND CANNOT CONTROL

One of the most important steps in helping someone with addiction is understanding the boundaries of your influence:

I Can Control:

- How I respond to the situation
- My own behaviors and choices
- The boundaries I set
- How I take care of myself
- The information and resources I offer
- The support I'm willing to provide
- How I communicate my concerns
- Whether I enable or set limits

I Cannot Control:

- Whether they accept help
- Their decision to use substances
- Their motivation to change
- The timeline of their recovery
- The choices they make
- Their emotional responses

- [] Their recognition of the problem
- [] The ultimate outcome

This distinction matters because:

- Focusing on what you can't control leads to frustration and burnout
 - Recognizing your limitations allows you to use your energy effectively
 - Understanding this boundary reduces unhelpful guilt and blame
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EFFECTIVE WAYS TO HELP

1. Educate Yourself

- Learn about addiction as a health condition
- Understand the specific substance(s) involved
- Research treatment options and resources
- Connect with support groups for families

2. Communicate Effectively

- Choose calm, private moments for important conversations
- Use "I" statements to express concerns ("I feel worried when...")
- Avoid accusatory language ("You always..." "You never...")
- Listen without interrupting or judging
- Express care for the person separate from their behavior
- Be honest but compassionate

3. Set and Maintain Healthy Boundaries

- Clearly communicate what behaviors you will and won't accept
- Follow through with stated consequences
- Focus boundaries on your wellbeing, not controlling them
- Be consistent with your limits
- Revisit and adjust boundaries as needed

4. Offer Support for Recovery (Not Addiction)

- Help research treatment options
- Offer to attend initial appointments
- Provide practical support for recovery activities
- Celebrate recovery milestones
- Learn how to respond to relapses constructively

5. Practice Self-Care

- Attend support groups for family members
- Consider your own counseling
- Maintain your own health and wellbeing
- Develop coping strategies for stress

- Connect with others who understand
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COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES

The **CRAFT Approach** (Community Reinforcement and Family Training) has been shown to be effective for family members:

1. Positive Communication

- Be brief and specific
- Label behavior, not the person
- Express understanding of their perspective
- Accept partial responsibility where appropriate
- Offer help with concrete issues

Example: Instead of: "You're irresponsible and don't care about anyone but yourself." Try: "I felt worried when you didn't come home last night because I care about your safety. I'd like us to find a way that works for both of us to let each other know where we are."

2. Positive Reinforcement

- Notice and acknowledge positive behaviors
- Offer authentic praise and appreciation
- Provide rewards for healthy choices
- Re-engage in activities they enjoy when sober
- Show gratitude for efforts toward change

Example: "I really enjoyed spending time with you at dinner tonight. It means a lot to me when we can connect like this."

3. Allowing Natural Consequences

- Avoid shielding from the natural results of substance use
- Step back from solving problems created by their use
- Express empathy without fixing the situation
- Focus on supporting recovery efforts, not addiction-related problems

Example: "I'm sorry you're feeling sick this morning. I know that's tough. I won't be able to call in sick for you, but I'd be happy to help you look into treatment options when you're feeling better."

SUPPORTING TREATMENT AND RECOVERY

When your loved one is ready for help, these approaches can make a difference:

Before Treatment:

- Help research appropriate options
- Assist with practical arrangements (childcare, time off work)
- Offer to help with insurance or financial arrangements
- Provide transportation to assessments or intake
- Express belief in their ability to change
- Other: _____

During Treatment:

- Follow treatment center guidelines for contact
- Participate in family programs if offered
- Work on your own patterns and responses
- Send encouraging messages if appropriate
- Prepare for their return home (if residential)
- Other: _____

Supporting Recovery:

- Learn about recovery and what helps maintain it
- Create a substance-free home environment
- Be patient with the recovery process
- Recognize that early recovery can be emotionally volatile
- Celebrate milestones and progress
- Develop new activities and traditions that don't involve substances
- Other: _____

If Relapse Occurs:

- Respond with compassion rather than judgment
- Maintain your boundaries
- Recognize relapse as part of the process for many
- Encourage return to recovery supports
- Focus on solutions rather than blame
- Other: _____

COMMON HELPING MISTAKES TO AVOID

Even with the best intentions, these common approaches often backfire:

1. Enabling

- Giving money that may fund addiction
- Making excuses for their behavior to others
- Bailing them out of consequences repeatedly
- Taking over their responsibilities
- Denying or minimizing the problem

2. Controlling

- Searching for or disposing of substances
- Constantly monitoring their activities
- Making threats you won't follow through on
- Trying to force them into treatment
- Taking charge of their recovery

3. Rescuing

- Repeatedly solving crisis situations
- Putting their emergencies before your needs
- Believing only you can help them
- Dropping everything when they call
- Prioritizing their recovery over your wellbeing

4. Blaming and Shaming

- Using guilt to motivate change
- Public confrontation or humiliation
- Bringing up past failures repeatedly
- Using labels like "addict," "alcoholic," "junkie"
- Punishment-focused responses

My typical helping mistakes:

How I can respond differently:

STAGING AN INTERVENTION

Formal interventions can be helpful but should be professionally guided:

When to Consider an Intervention:

- The person is resistant to acknowledging the problem
- Previous attempts to express concern have been dismissed
- The situation has become dangerous or life-threatening
- Multiple people are affected and want to be involved

Intervention Best Practices:

- Work with a professional interventionist or addiction counselor
- Include only those with a meaningful relationship to the person
- Focus on specific behaviors and their impact, not character
- Have treatment options immediately available
- Prepare for various possible responses
- Express care and concern rather than anger or blame
- Set clear boundaries about what will happen if treatment is refused

To find a professional interventionist:

- Ask treatment centers for recommendations
 - Contact the Association of Intervention Specialists
 - Consult an addiction counselor or therapist
 - Reach out to SAMHSA's helpline: 1-800-662-HELP (4357)
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TAKING CARE OF YOURSELF

Supporting someone with addiction can be exhausting. Your wellbeing matters too:

Signs You May Need More Support:

- Persistent anxiety or depression
- Sleep disturbances
- Neglecting your own health
- Isolation from others
- Preoccupation with their addiction
- Financial strain from supporting them
- Difficulty concentrating on other aspects of life
- Physical symptoms of stress
- Other: _____

Self-Care Strategies:

1. **Connect with others**
 - Join a support group (Al-Anon, Nar-Anon, SMART Recovery Family)
 - Maintain relationships outside of the addiction situation
 - Consider individual therapy or counseling
2. **Set emotional boundaries**
 - Limit time spent discussing the addiction
 - Create space for joy and pleasure in your life
 - Practice detaching with love
3. **Develop coping skills**
 - Learn stress management techniques
 - Practice mindfulness or meditation
 - Engage in physical activity
 - Journal about your experiences
4. **Remember your identity beyond this role**
 - Reconnect with personal interests and hobbies
 - Set and pursue your own goals
 - Nurture other important relationships

My self-care commitments:

1.

2.

3.

SUPPORTING WITHOUT ENABLING

One of the most challenging aspects of helping is finding the balance between support and enabling:

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SUPPORT VS. ENABLING BEHAVIORS	
SUPPORT LOOKS LIKE:	ENABLING LOOKS LIKE:
Listening with empathy	Making excuses for behavior
Setting clear boundaries	Having inconsistent limits
Offering to help find treatment	Giving money that may fund substance use
Encouraging recovery activities	Joining in substance use to "keep an eye on them"
Allowing natural consequences	Shielding from consequences
Taking care of your own wellbeing	Neglecting your own needs
Celebrating recovery efforts	Rewarding or reinforcing harmful behaviors

☐ Questions to ask yourself when offering help:

1. Am I helping the person, or helping the addiction?
2. Will this action protect them from experiencing the natural consequences of their behavior?

3. Am I doing something they could and should do for themselves?
 4. Is my assistance solving a short-term problem while enabling a long-term one?
 5. Would I be doing this if addiction wasn't involved?
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WHEN YOUR LOVED ONE IS READY FOR CHANGE

Signs they may be open to help:

- Expressing concern about their substance use
- Acknowledging negative consequences
- Showing interest in how others have gotten help
- Making attempts to cut down or control use
- Talking about wanting a different life
- Asking questions about treatment options
- Other: _____

How to respond to openness:

1. Listen without judgment or interruption
2. Express belief in their ability to change
3. Have information ready but don't overwhelm
4. Offer specific, practical help (rides, childcare, research)
5. Act quickly—openness may be brief
6. Suggest starting with an assessment rather than committing to full treatment
7. Share recovery stories that offer hope

Resources to have ready:

- SAMHSA's National Helpline: 1-800-662-HELP (4357)
 - SAMHSA's Treatment Locator: findtreatment.samhsa.gov
 - Local treatment center options (outpatient and residential)
 - Names of addiction specialists or therapists
 - Recovery support group information
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SUPPORTING CHILDREN AFFECTED BY A LOVED ONE'S ADDICTION

When addiction affects a parent, partner, or other family member, children need special support:

What Children Need:

- Age-appropriate information about addiction
- Permission to talk about what's happening
- To know the addiction is not their fault
- Consistent routines and structure
- Safe spaces away from active addiction
- Trusted adults they can talk to

- Opportunities to be children, not caretakers
- Support for their feelings

How to Help Children:

- 1. Provide honest, age-appropriate information**
 - For young children: "They have an illness that makes them behave differently sometimes."
 - For older children: More details about addiction as a brain disorder
 - 2. Create predictability and safety**
 - Maintain consistent routines
 - Develop safety plans for crisis situations
 - Ensure regular contact with stable adults
 - 3. Connect them with support**
 - Programs like Alateen
 - School counselors
 - Support groups for children
 - Trusted family members or friends
 - 4. Watch for warning signs they need additional help:**
 - Changes in behavior or mood
 - Declining school performance
 - Social withdrawal
 - Taking on parent/caretaker roles
 - Physical complaints (headaches, stomachaches)
 - Sleep disturbances
 - Other: _____
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SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS

If Your Loved One Is Unwilling to Get Help:

- Set clear, consistent boundaries
- Join a support group for family members
- Consider a professional intervention
- Focus on your own wellbeing
- Be ready when/if they become open to help
- Remember that forcing treatment rarely works long-term

If You Live with Someone with Addiction:

- Create safety plans for yourself and other household members
- Consider whether continued living together is healthy
- Set clear household rules and consequences
- Secure valuables, medications, and financial information
- Know when to involve emergency services

If Your Loved One Has Co-occurring Mental Health Issues:

- Seek treatment providers who address both addiction and mental health
- Learn about how mental health and addiction interact
- Recognize that both conditions need treatment
- Understand that self-medication is common but ineffective

If You Are in a Romantic Relationship:

- Honestly assess whether the relationship is healthy
 - Consider couples counseling with someone experienced in addiction
 - Be clear about what you need to stay in the relationship
 - Recognize that recovery doesn't automatically fix relationship issues
 - Take time for your own healing
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RESOURCES FOR FAMILIES AND FRIENDS

Support Groups:

- Al-Anon/Alateen: al-anon.org
- Nar-Anon: nar-anon.org
- SMART Recovery Family & Friends: smartrecovery.org/family
- Parents of Addicted Loved Ones: palgroup.org
- Families Anonymous: familiesanonymous.org

Helplines:

- SAMHSA's National Helpline: 1-800-662-HELP (4357)
- Partnership to End Addiction Helpline: 1-855-378-4373

Books:

- "Beyond Addiction" by Jeffrey Foote et al.
- "Get Your Loved One Sober" by Robert Meyers and Brenda Wolfe
- "Addict in the House" by Robin Barnett
- "Codependent No More" by Melody Beattie
- "Everything Changes" by Beverly Conyers

Online Resources:

- SAMHSA.gov
 - DrugAbuse.gov
 - HazeldenBettyFord.org
 - Partnership to End Addiction: drugfree.org
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MY SUPPORT PLAN

Instructions: Use this section to create your personal plan for supporting your loved one while taking care of yourself.

My boundaries are:

When I notice enabling behaviors, I will:

My self-care commitments:

People I can turn to for support:

Professional resources I'll connect with:

My communication approach will be:

REMEMBER

- You didn't cause the addiction
- You can't control it
- You can't cure it
- But you can contribute to a healthier environment for everyone involved
- Your wellbeing matters too
- Recovery is possible
- You deserve support on this journey
