

When Substance Abuse Affects Others – What Helps?

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Six Survival Skills for Families and Significant Others Who Are Affected by Substance Abuse

- Separate yourself, detach from the problem
- Set limits, roles, and boundaries
- Solidify your position – know where you stand
- Support sobriety
- Simplify your approach by setting small goals
- Sustain your physical, mental, & spiritual health

<http://chhs.gsu.edu/socialwork/ligon.asp>

Resources and Help:

Al-Anon and Alateen
<http://www.al-anon.alateen.org/>

Al-Anon/Alateen - Espanol
<http://www.al-anon.alateen.org/spanish/>

Nar-Anon
<http://nar-anon.org/index.html>

Information About Drugs
<http://www.health.org/>

Getting Help for Adults:
www.findtreatment.samhsa.gov/

Getting Help for Children:
www.family.samhsa.gov/

Information for Families & Friends
<http://alcoholism.about.com/od/>

Dealing with the Effects of Substance Abuse on Families

It is widely known that the abuse of alcohol and other drugs is directly connected to most crime, incarcerations, domestic violence, child abuse, and problems related to work.

Understandably, the primary focus of treatment and intervention has been on the person who has a substance abuse problem. However, there are far more people who are affected by substance abusers than there are those who abuse alcohol and other drugs.

Fortunately, more attention is now being given to the serious impact substance abuse has on families and significant others who live or work with a person abusing or addicted to drugs.

Families (including spouses, partners, children, siblings, and others who are connected to someone who abuses substances) are affected emotionally, physically, spiritually, and economically. Many family members live in a state of constant fear and uncertainty about what to do.

Six skills are summarized below that can be useful to family members and significant others in learning new ways to address substance abuse in the family. The six skills do not have to be followed in any particular order and some may be easier to master than others. It takes practice!



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Six Skills for Family Survival and Change

1. Separate yourself, detach from the problem. This skill can be the most difficult to grasp at first. Sometimes people hear this to mean that we should walk away from our loved one. Actually what is meant by separation is to become clear that the person who is abusing alco-

hol and other drugs has the substance abuse problem – not the family member. It is very important to grasp this skill.

2. Set limits, roles and boundaries. Many family members have done things for substance abusers that seemed as though

they could help. Calling in sick for substance abusers, bailing them out of jail, and many other attempts to help can actually make things worse by delaying them from having to address the problem. Limits can be set to stop doing things that they should do themselves.

Six Survival Skills...continued

3. Solidify your position– know where you stand. As new ways of dealing with the problem begin to be seen by the substance abuser, there may be anger and hostility towards family members. By deciding on a position and sticking to it, the addicted person begins to learn that this is now the new way things are handled. This is good for everybody– the abuser and the family. Consistency is essential.

4. Support sobriety: There are many ways to support sobriety–

to clearly let the substance abuser know that you are there for them in the recovery process. Compliments about positive change, attending Al-Anon, Nar-Anon, or Al-Ateen groups, participating in family therapy, and asking the person about their progress, are all examples of ways to support sobriety.

5. Simplify your approach by setting small goals. Substance abuser must set small goals like “One Day at a Time.” The same is true for families. A good goal is a small goal. Indeed

families can become very overwhelmed and it is important to step back and set one small goal just for today.

6. Sustain your physical, mental, and spiritual health. All three of these drop off when people abuse substances and the same often happens to those who are affected by the problem. Eating properly, getting exercise, taking breaks, and addressing spiritual needs are very important for family members. Taking care of your personal needs is a must.



Families may feel like they are in a boat with no paddles, as if they are alone and adrift.

Practice Makes Perfect

Doing things differently and trying something new is a risk and takes courage– especially when dealing with substance abuse. There are two ingredients to success: 1) having the determination to try new approaches and 2) seeking support from others in doing so.

As noted in the 5th skill, take small steps and set small goals. Discuss your concerns, suc-

cesses, and failures with others who support your efforts. Actually, the substance abuser can come to be your #1 supporter! Of course, this is contingent on recovery and no one can guarantee that this will happen.

Others who can offer support are 12-Step group members from Al-Anon, Nar-Anon, and Al-ateen, counselors, pastors, friends, and other family mem-

bers. Some people (including family members) will not understand this at all and may see you as not being a “good” family member. Find those who do understand, and seek their support in helping to make things better in your family, at work, and in your home. Know that you are not adrift or alone in your struggle. Reach out, ask for help, and hang on to the hope that things can change.

“I had to report any concerns I had to his treatment team. It was hard at first, but I know now it is best to call. I’m consistent on this; my position is solid– it’s helped.”

When Families Are Involved, Treatment Can be More Successful

Researchers have found that when family members are involved and supportive of substance abusers seeking treatment, the likelihood of success is improved. Not only can family members work towards making things better for themselves, but they can increase the chances of the substance abuser reaching recovery.

Many times we start to see changes in the person with an addiction history. Their mood, eating patterns, appearance, or friends may change. They may reduce or stop going to 12-Step meetings or counseling sessions. These can be the initial signs of relapse, which may be seen first in the home.

As noted in the first skill, relapse is not our problem, but we can support sobriety (skill #4) by providing feedback to the substance abuser about the changes we see.

Substance abuse can cause families to feel angry and fearful. The best antidote is to address what is going on. Staying alert and on-track is important.



Many families are affected by substance abuse - asking for help is the first step.