

When Your Partner is Struggling with an Addiction: 10 Tips to Build Resilience and Begin Healing

Substance abuse affects millions of families either directly or indirectly, and the abuse of both legal and illegal substances is a prominent concern for public health officials throughout the world. Many addicts who stop using point to the strength, persistence, and understanding they received from a spouse, family member or friend as a major reason for their recovery. (If the relationship has turned violent, a breakup may be the best option.)

As a partner of a substance user, you are at higher risk for developing poor patterns of communication and problem-solving; having marital, financial, and child-rearing problems; sexual dysfunction; verbal and physical aggression; and episodes of depression. You may have heard terms like “enabler” and “co-dependent” in the self-help literature. These terms mean basically this: all of your energy may be focused on the user – trying to rescue him or her, or cover-up for him or her, or stop him or her from destroying lives. The good news is: research suggests that when you begin concentrating on your own needs and leave the substance abuser to the consequences of his or her own actions, the probability of recovery increases.

The purpose of this Tip Sheet is to offer hope and practical suggestions for you as your partner is struggling with addiction. It is not meant to replace therapy or counseling. Like most other suggestions, keep in mind that what works for one, may not work for another. You are ultimately the one who knows what is best for you.



Tips

The painful truth is that you cannot change your addicted partner! You can only change yourself. In order to be that strong, persistent person that your partner may one day point to in his or her recovery, stop concentrating on your partner and the problem, and start taking care of yourself. Here are some more tips:

1. **Educate yourself** – A basic understanding of the problem is fundamental to being able to resolve any issue. It is important that you begin to learn more about the addiction process and how it affects the partner of the addict. This will empower you with new ideas and help you process the guilt, frustration, and anger that go along with being married to an addict.
2. **Attend support groups** – Don't continue fighting alone. It is important to find a group to help support you through the difficulties and challenges of living with a substance user. This

may be an Alanon group, a church group, a counselor experienced in addictions, or simply some good friends. Research has shown that support groups help relieve depressive symptoms; decrease social isolation; improve social adjustment; increase knowledge about the problem; and provide coping strategies, as well as, techniques to effectively deal with the problem. You may not feel connected to the first support group you attend, but don't give up! Keep looking until you find the right one.

3. **Stop the fighting** – It is particularly senseless to argue with someone when they have been using a substance. In fact, some studies indicate that not having any interaction with the substance user while they are under the influence of a substance is the best course of action. Avoid the person until they are sober.
4. **Be a cheerleader** – When the addicted partner is not using, do your best to be positive with them. This will send the message that you care and will allow you to feel good about yourself. If you are negative when they are not using, you will have fallen into the trap of allowing the substance use to define who you are and how you behave.
5. **Avoid triggers to use** – Recognizing places, people, situations, events, etc., that seem to trigger substance use by your partner is an important step toward change. Develop a secret code that your addicted partner can use to signal you that he or she is struggling with a situation and needs help getting away from the temptation. Be sensitive and responsive to their needs even if it means doing things like leaving an event early or not visiting certain family members.
6. **Find new couple activities** – Substance users tend to be very egocentric and spend a lot of time in their heads thinking about themselves, their problems, and their cravings. To combat this egocentrism, get involved in some sort of community service that focuses mental and physical energy on others. This activity gives the addict a sense of fulfillment and helps them rebuild a depleted self-esteem. This will also do the same for the partner of an addict. Doing this together will allow you as a couple to develop a shared interest and new friends around an activity that doesn't include substance use.
7. **Rebuild trust over time** – After using stops, rebuilding a trusting relationship is one of the most difficult obstacles remaining for a couple. **This will take time and patience.** Addicts are often very accomplished liars and have, over the years, provided many reasons not to be trusted. Find small ways that the addicted partner can successfully show that they are again trustworthy and express your pleasure when they succeed. This is a particularly difficult task for the partner that has had their trust broken time and time again by the addict.
8. **Love the person, hate their behaviors** – Making a distinction between the person and their behavior is sometimes hard to do, but is an important step toward your own freedom. Your family member is not a “bad” person, but a person with a “bad” disease. When you are able to make this distinction, you are set free to express the powerful emotions within you.
9. **Restore your communication** – Couples often get in a pattern of simply reacting to each other in a negative way. They know that their behavior isn't constructive and neither enjoys it, but they can't stop. This is particularly so for couples in which one partner struggles with an addiction. The repeated stress taints their interpretation of

each other. This leads to a tendency to blame and accuse each other using statements that are really opinions, perceptions, or interpretations of the other person's behavior and intentions. Learning to use "I" statements helps restore communication and trust. For example, notice the difference in how the following statements open up options and empower a person to act less defensively and focus on behaviors:

Blaming Statement	"I" Statement
'You never listen to me!'	'I find it difficult to talk to you when I don't feel heard.'
'You will never change.'	'I seem to get the same reaction from you whenever we talk.'
'Work is never going to make you happy.'	'I haven't found my work to be something I enjoy.'
'You don't care about me.'	'I have often felt that you haven't understood the difficulties I am having.'
'You are a bully.'	'I feel intimidated when you speak like that.'

See more NHMRC Tip Sheets on positive communication skills:

Part 1 - [Honey Did You Hear Me? A Game Plan for Active Listening](#)

Part 2 - [Listening is Not a Spectator Sport: Rules for Active Listening](#)

Part 3 - [Avoiding Communication Fouls](#)

10. **Relax** –Deep breathing exercises, stretching, and other relaxation methods are an essential part of stress management that decrease the wear and tear on your mind and body from the difficulties and strains of daily living. Practicing relaxation techniques a few minutes a day can reduce stress symptoms by:

- Slowing your heart rate
- Lowering blood pressure
- Slowing your breathing rate
- Increasing blood flow to major muscles
- Reducing muscle tension and chronic pain
- Improving concentration
- Reducing anger and frustration
- Boosting confidence to handle problems

The addiction process and, thus, dealing with a partner that is struggling with an addiction is complex. It is crucial that the non-using partner take actions that will bolster her or his own mental health and resilience. Renew your conviction to live your life according to your values and identity, and not to react to the manipulations of a substance that has taken control of your partner. If your partner, at some point, decides to reclaim control of his or her life, then upon entering into recovery they will find a strong, resilient companion to help them along the way. If not, then you will be sad for him or her, but you will have invested in yourself.

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