



The
Recovery
Trust.

Families and Carers Guide to Help and Support.

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Introduction

There is no doubt; the impact of living with addiction can be devastating. Yet family members can survive; even thrive despite the disruption caused by these problems.

In 2003, the Government's report Hidden Harm was published to highlight the needs of families living with addiction. They called it Hidden Harm because addiction is so often covered up, hidden and not openly talked about. Family members often feel trapped, isolated and powerless.

Four million people are addicted to alcohol and other drugs across England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. For each of those four million people, it affects at least two close family members, probably more. There are a vast number of mothers, fathers, children, partners, brothers, sisters or grandparents living with someone's alcohol or drug addiction.

This booklet is an introduction to how families are affected by addiction and what can help.

- It is not an easy answer to a complex issue.
- It is also not a replacement for professional help if families need it.



Understanding Addiction Defining Words and What They Mean to Us

It will help if we are clear about what we mean by words used in this booklet, so we all mean the same thing. These words are:

- Family
- Addiction
- Drugs
- Alcoholism
- Resilience

Family: There are many forms of “families” today. They are not just defined by the people who live under the same roof. For the purposes of this booklet, a family is a group of people with a strong emotional connection with each other, whether they live together or not.

Drugs: A drug is a chemical which causes a change (or several changes) in the way the human body works, either mentally, physically or emotionally. This definition includes alcohol. Alcohol is the most misused drug in the UK. It also includes over the counter medication, prescription medication, solvents and illegal drugs.



Resilience: Resilience is the ability to “bounce back” from adversity. Research into resilience has looked at what helps people to survive or even thrive in the face of difficult circumstances. This includes their personality, skills that they have learned or the right kind of support.

Addiction: “Addiction is when someone continues doing something, like drinking or using drugs despite the harm to their physical health, mental health, relationships, etc.

Excessive drinking or drug use can cause problems for both the individual and their family. The extreme problems that comes with addiction can increase the challenges for families. The word addiction is used throughout the booklet as opposed to addiction and problematic substance abuse.

Alcoholism: Put simply, alcoholism is an addiction to the drug alcohol.

As helpful as defining words can be, it is hard to understand some complex issues like addiction. That will need a much closer look.



Understanding Addiction and Alcoholism

If an alien arrived on earth today and watched someone excessively misuse alcohol or other drugs, it would seem completely insane. Why would anyone choose to continue to harm themselves and the ones they care about in such a destructive way?

From looking at it from the outside it can seem completely irrational. It can be hard for the person with the addiction to understand let alone for the people who care about them.

Characteristics of Addiction

No matter what substance someone is addicted to, there are certain characteristics that all addiction has in common. To diagnose addiction, a medically trained person will look for:

1. Loss of control over the drug's use.
2. The use of alcohol or drugs becomes the most important thing. This is even over things that were once important like family, health, career.
3. Compulsion to use. The person gets locked into only seeing the benefits and not the harm it will do.
4. Withdrawal. The person's body reacts to the drug leaving the body.
5. Personal losses or major life consequences as a result of drinking or using drugs.
6. Continue using in the face of serious consequences.

You don't need all of these characteristics but just some of them.

No one sets out to become addicted. There are different things that contribute to becoming addicted including:

- availability of the drug
- heavy use
- genetics and a family history of addiction
- personality
- beginning to use at a young age

This means that anyone excessively using mood altering drugs like alcohol run the risk of becoming addicted.

On the other hand, people can and do recover, if you look at the CAIS website (www.cais.co.uk) you will see people who have reached a point in their lives saying, "I just don't want this anymore."

With support and determination, they are making changes in their lives that help them stick to that decision.

What is Normal Anyway?

Do "normal families" always talk over problems, never get angry with each other, always pay bills on time, or enjoy holidays and special occasions stress free? The "perfect family" only exists on TV. Every family has their ups and downs. Families do their best with what they have.

What makes families work well is the ability to meet the physical and emotional needs of its members. There is a feeling of security and shared identity. What contributes to a healthier atmosphere within the family?

The ability to:

- Interact with each other without put-downs.
- Say yes or no to other family member's requests without fear of rejection.
- Ask without being demanding.
- Show feelings without fear of losing the relationship.
- Have special relationships with individuals in and outside the family.
- Be honest and feel trusted by each other.
- Celebrate and have fun together.
- Be confident that relationships are stable.

Structures that families have:

Rules: Rules are guidelines the family has. They express a family's core beliefs and values. How respect is shown, being honest, permission to express how you feel, even who sits at the head of the table are examples of family rules. While they may not be openly talked about, rules are still there.

Roles: A role is what someone consistently does that has a purpose and function. Listener, timekeeper, disciplinarian, comedian or coach are examples of roles family members consciously or unconsciously take on.

Rituals: Rituals are customs or family activities that establish and maintain a family's identity and a feeling of connection with each other. Sunday lunch, celebrations like birthdays and Christmas are family traditions or rituals.

Hierarchies: Hierarchies are relationships within the family that are defined by levels of responsibility. For example, parents are at the top of the hierarchy and hold most of the responsibility for maintaining the family's survival.

Boundaries: A boundary is an imaginary fence or line of demarcation between individual family members, between groups within a family (parents/children, boys/girls, etc) and around the family itself that contribute to the closeness and safety of family members. It is not healthy for boundaries to be too rigid or for a family to have no boundaries at all.

While these structures exist in most families, the atmosphere and structures change through the chaos and unpredictability when there is addiction.

The **Impact** of Addiction on the Family

What do family members experience living with addiction?

As Bill Wilson, co-founder of Alcoholics Anonymous wrote, “any family member who has to live with an alcoholic is bound to become distorted themselves.” How does anyone make sense, let alone deal with someone excessively using alcohol or drugs?

Family members talk about:

- The sheer stress they are under as a result of the difficulties that come with addiction.
- Real worries about the drinker or drug user, their children and themselves.
- Home and family life are under threat from the drinker’s or drug taker’s behaviour.
- The signs of stress that are beginning to show.

Terms like co-dependency can be helpful in explaining how addiction takes over everyone. Family members can get obsessive about changing or helping the addicted person. The focus is always on them and your needs are forgotten about. Enabling is used to describe how family members unintentionally make it easier for the alcoholic or drug user to continue misusing alcohol or drugs.

These terms are not helpful if it is suggesting you are “wrong” by what you are doing. Family members are caught between caring about the person with the addiction and struggling to cope.

One other pattern is how the family members are really affected remains unseen. Driven by guilt and shame, the problem is hidden.

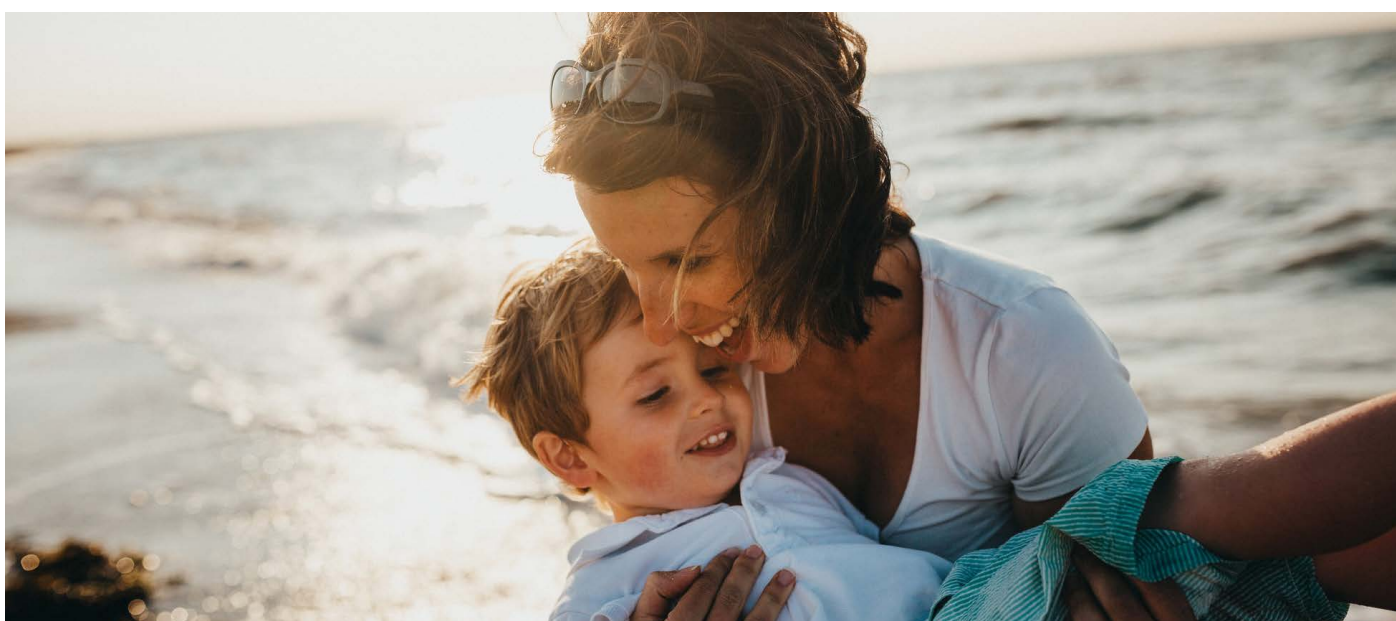
Common myths that families believe:

- If we don't talk about it, it doesn't exist.
- If we keep doing what we are doing, even if it does not really help, somehow things will get better.
- It can seem just "normal". This is the way things are. People begin to accept what is not acceptable.
- Addiction is someone's fault. Someone is to blame.

While the cast of personalities may be different, what happens in homes where there is active addiction can follow predictable patterns:

- There is an undercurrent of tension and anxiety.
- There is constant uncertainty of what will happen next.
- Living with someone abusing alcohol or other drugs addictively is like living with Jekyll and Hyde. You never know who will appear.
- Even while extreme things keep happening, family members are not really prepared for them.
- People don't really talk openly. They can retreat and withdraw or be on the attack.

Like an iceberg, others see how the family appears to be coping on the surface, yet the turmoil and trauma is unseen below the surface.



Stages of Coping

Families can go through stages of coping when faced with addiction. Each stage can vary in intensity and extremes from family to family.

Denial: The problem does not exist. Family members do not acknowledge the existence of any problem with alcohol or other drugs. Family members may be excusing, denying or minimising the problem. Efforts to hide the problem from the outside world suggests it is having a bigger impact than people will admit.

Attempts to “fix” the problem: Bargaining, pleading, threatening, pouring drink out. Family members become obsessed with the drinking or drug use and changing the drinker or drug user. Their own needs are ignored.

Disorganisation and chaos: Family balance is disrupted. Episodes of mayhem and chaos are common. The anticipation and fear of drinking or drug episodes are there during periods of abstinence. “Walking on eggshells” is a common description of how family members live in fear of the next drink or drug binge.

Reorganisation in spite of the problem: Roles are created to maintain some sense of normality. Someone may take over paying the bills or make decisions.

Efforts to escape: Physically and emotionally, distance is created. Separations and children leaving home can happen. People have had enough. They don't have to follow any order. Some family members get stuck in some of the above stages. What we don't often see is the underlying trauma and emotional pain family members are suffering.

Recovery and reorganisation can and does happen. Family members can begin to recover, address their needs whether the drinking or drug use stops or not.

How are families and family life affected by addiction?

These words best describe life with addiction.

- Unpredictable
- Chaotic
- Excessive

Routines: With its unpredictability, routines are affected. A constant level of uncertainty is always there.

Communication: Communication changes or stops. The lack of communication adds to more conflict and anxiety. Lying and deception become common place so trust is broken.

Social life: Isolation and withdrawal due to shame or embarrassment is common. Families retreat inward to cope. Common examples of this are not bringing friends to the house or refusing invitations to social events.

Rituals: Rituals surrounding special occasions i.e. birthdays, Christmas, weddings and any other family celebrations can repeat unpleasant experiences.

Rules: All families have rules that guide what they do, but the families living with addiction have rules that centre on alcohol or drug use. The unacceptable becomes acceptable. The alcoholic or addict controls all. If they are down, you are down. The rules don't get openly agreed on, but exist all the same.

Some of these rules include:

Don't Talk Family secrets, especially about the drinking or drug use are never discussed.

Don't Trust It's difficult to trust if there is little communication. Lies and broken promises destroy trust. Family members learn to mistrust others and eventually themselves.

Don't Feel Possibly the most destructive rule of all. The expression of feelings rocks the boat. Family members learn not to talk about feelings but to hide them.

Other unhelpful rules that need challenged:

- Be good, strong, right and perfect: Preoccupation with standards that keep changing.
- Don't rock the boat.
- Don't communicate directly.
- Let someone else take responsibility for me.



Resilience: A ray of hope

From all that has been discussed, the impact of addiction on the family can seem pretty bleak.

What does make it worse is:

- the absence of a stable figure in the family's life.
- not seeking help.
- the energy it takes to keep things the same.

Despite what stress people may be living with, there is considerable evidence that people can live with all sorts of difficult situations, including addiction, without developing significant problems.

Studies of people growing up with extreme hardships show that many of these people grew to be competent, caring and confident. The difference is factors in their lives that supported resilience.

What is resilience?

Resilience is the ability to recover and move on in the face of difficulties. A simpler definition is to be able to “bounce back” from life's struggles. While resilience is something people are born with, many believe it is lost or damaged in some people through the problems they face.

For adults and young people, it is not necessarily the need to be “stronger”. It is creating space to:

- Focus on themselves and their own needs.
- Develop without the responsibility of other peoples' behaviour.
- Learn or relearn skills and attitudes to enjoy the pleasures of living while coping the best you can.

Believing you can change is important

One of the most important strengths anyone living with addiction can have is a belief that they can change.

While you cannot make the person, you love to stop drinking or using drugs, it does not mean you are powerless.

You can look after you! The factors that build resilience can be developed. The “stages of change” is often applied to the person using alcohol or other drugs. We believe it applies to people living with addiction as well. You can use it not to change the drinker or drug user, but to change yourself. This can include change regarding roles, rules, patterns of communication or other things discussed earlier in this booklet.

The “stages of change” are a series of stages which people pass through in the course of changing a specific problem. These stages apply equally to people working through these problems themselves or with outside help. The stages are often pictured in a ‘wheel’ or circle. It is normal for people to go around the cycle several times before achieving a lasting, stable change.

The Stages of Change

Precontemplation: You are happy the way things are. You have not thought about change.

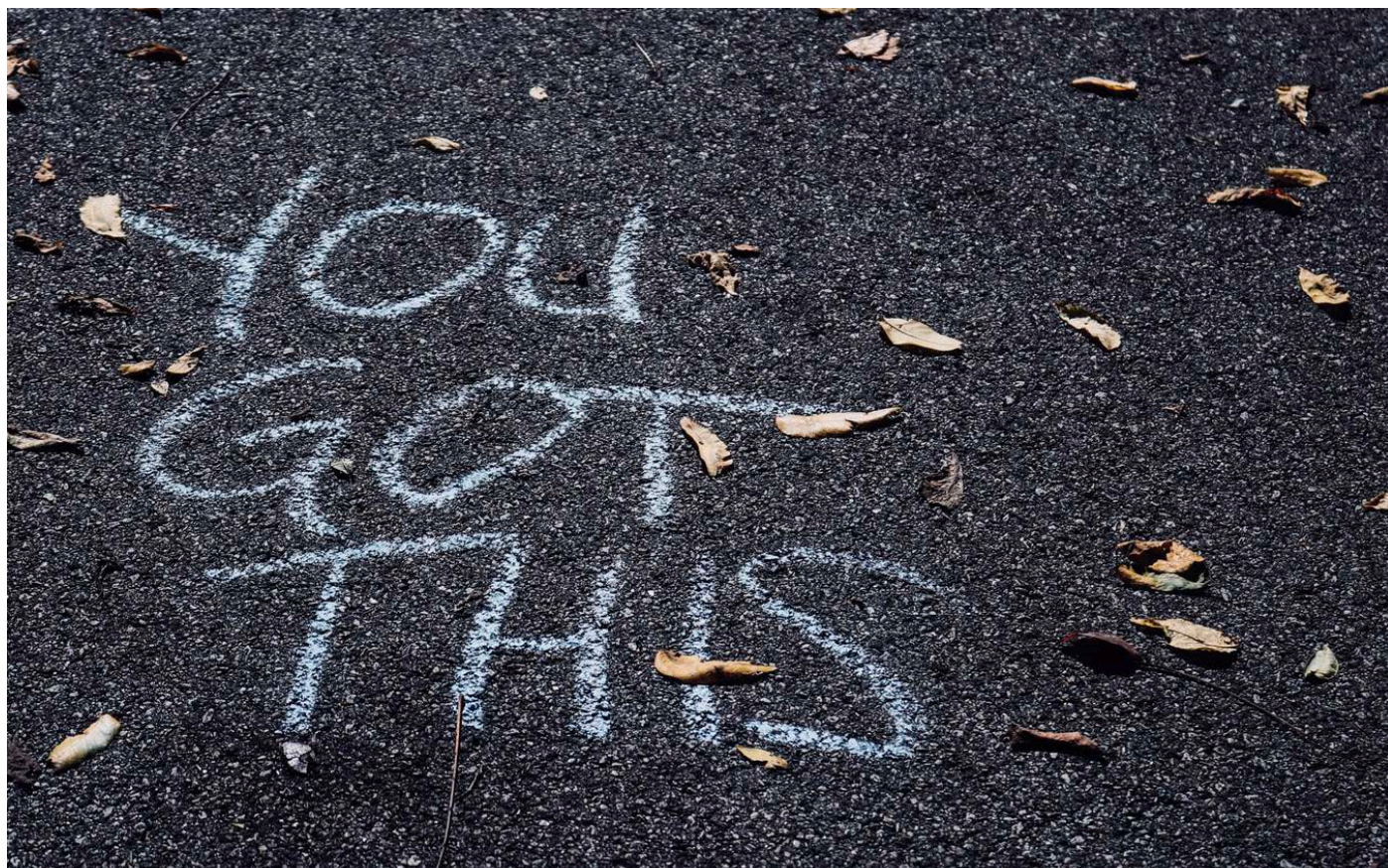
Contemplation: You want things to be different and have thought about change but have not put this into action.

Preparation: You've made a committed decision to change now or in the very near future and have a plan.

Action: You have started to make changes.

Maintenance: You have reached your goals and are maintaining change

Relapse: It can happen that you slip back to a previous stage.



Family Recovery

The power to change is in your hands. Through recovery, the family member can regain a quality of life that has been disrupted by addiction. There are things you can do to help this process.

Anyone can change when they make committed, deliberate effort and get the support they need. A starting point is to break those unwritten rules:

Talk, own and express your feelings and learn to trust, starting with trusting yourself.

For adults:

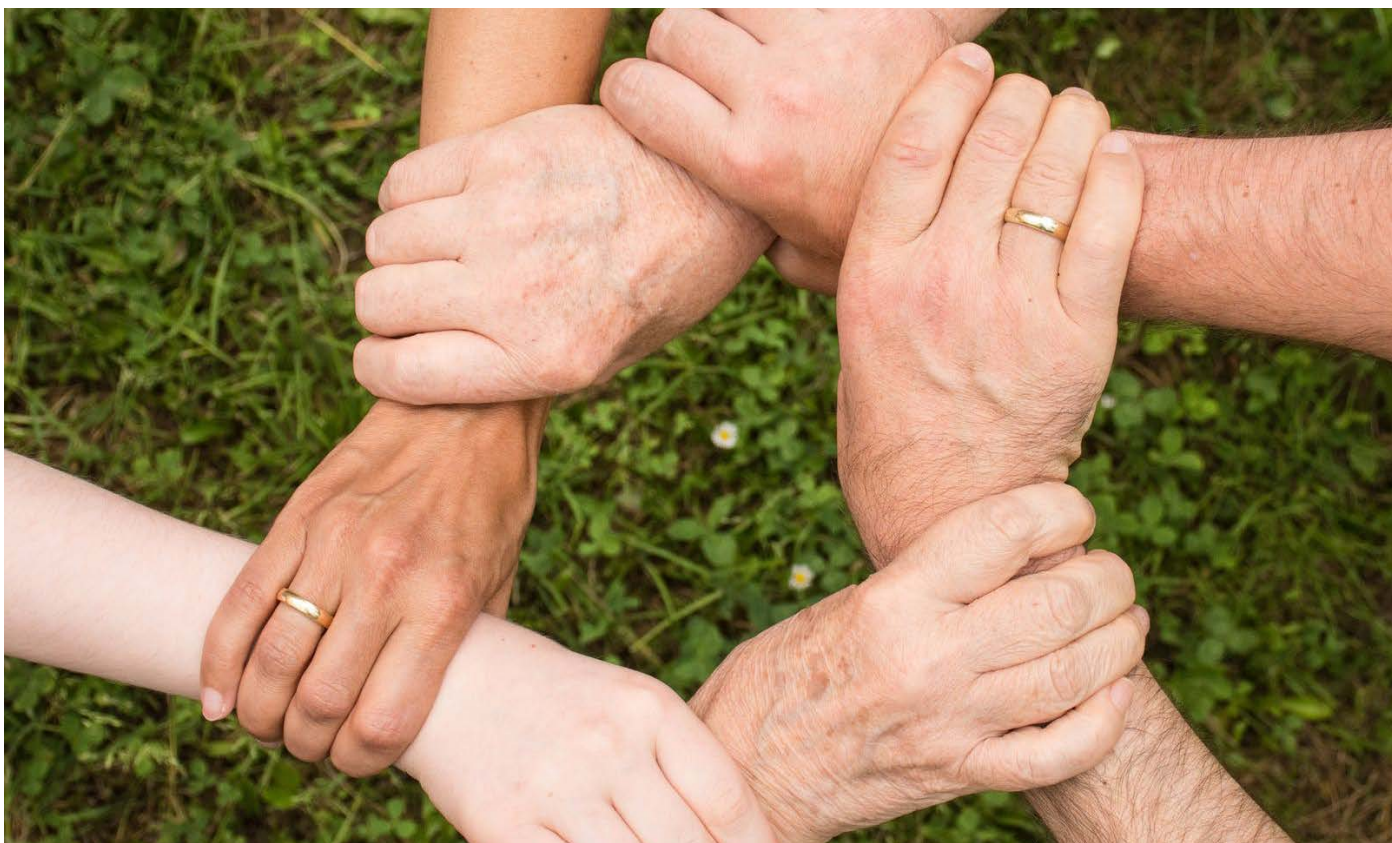
- Increase support for yourself.
- Realise you are not to blame for their drinking or drug use.
- Learn all you can about alcoholism, addiction and recovery.
- Take time for yourself emotionally.
- Realise that you cannot control their drinking/drug taking – they must make that choice.

For children and young people

- Talk about what you are going through.
- Remember you are never to blame for your parent's drinking or drug use.
- Learn about addiction and recovery in ways that are ok for your age.
- Have fun. Do things other children and young people do.
- Everyone needs help from others sometimes. If things get hard, have people you can turn to.
- Develop a back-up plan for any crisis. Someone you can ring, somewhere you can go.

If the family member continues to drink/use drugs:

- Don't nag, preach or lecture. You will only force them to make promises that will be broken.
- Tell them how what they are doing is affecting you and your family when they are sober enough to hear it.
- Avoid any threat unless you have carefully thought it out and intend to carry it out.
- Prevent the drinker/drug user from avoiding responsibility. Let them deal with the consequences of their drinking or drug use.
- Don't hide the drink or drugs or dispose of it - they will only buy more.
- Try to keep some positive feelings for the drinker or drug user. You can love the person but hate the problem.
- Don't regard this as a family disgrace. Any family can have problems with alcohol or other drugs.
- Recovery from alcoholism/addiction can come about as in any other illness.
- Don't expect 100% recovery overnight. In any illness there is a period of convalescence and possible relapse.



Coping

Coping with extreme stress, let alone the chronic stress that comes with addiction is a challenge. There are no rules about how to cope with someone's excessive drinking or drug use. Because you have had to work it out on your own, it's a bit like trial and error.

"Coping may not mean being resilient. It is how you tend to respond to what you are living with. For some, it may mean doing what you have to do to get by." (Silent Voices, 2012)

Research into the styles of coping families use describes these ways as:

Putting up with it (Tolerant)

- Being lenient, accepting and self-sacrificing: i.e. cleaning up messes, fixing problems the drinker/drug user caused.
- Shielding the drinker/drug user from the harm they do themselves.

Trying to regain control (Engaged)

- Trying to change the drinker/drug user and their behaviour.
- Trying to control their drinking or drug use.
- Taking charge of the family.

Withdrawing or gaining independence (Withdrawn)

- Putting some emotional/ physical distance between themselves and the drinker/drug user.
- Being independent and doing something for themselves.

What family members have said happens when the ways they try to cope just don't work.

- They mirror the behaviour of the alcoholic or addict. "When they are ok, we are ok. When they are down, we are down".
- Get obsessed with making things perfect or fixing things for people.
- Channel all their energies into work or household tasks to distract themselves from what is really going on.
- Ignore their own needs because they are so tied up with the needs of the person misusing alcohol or drugs.

While you can't necessarily control what is going on outside yourselves, you can find ways to reduce that pressure from within.

The greater focus on your quality of life, the more your coping actions will involve:

- Looking after your needs.
- Personal enjoyment.
- Not actively trying to control their use of alcohol or drugs or change the drinker or drug taker

Letting Go

What do we mean by letting go?

Letting go is:

- Living in the present and not the past.
- Accepting what you can and cannot control.

What are some types of letting go?

- Letting go of guilt: Accepting your part to play in things and other's contribution.
- Accepting personal responsibility for yourself and what you do.
- Handing the responsibility for others back to them and encouraging them to accept the consequences of their actions.
- Letting go of the fear of change. Accepting that change is an inevitable part of life.

Ways to let go

Thinking things through objectively and accurately is a positive way to let things go.

Ask yourself:

- How much of my life am I willing to let this affect?
- Will this last a short time or forever? Will this affect me next week?
- Am I totally to blame or are others partly responsible?
- Am I missing something positive in this?

Relaxation is another skill that helps us let go. Relaxation needs to be learned and practiced like any skill. Here are two self calming techniques that work for people.

Deep Breathing 7/11

This is a simple, but powerful technique. It is easy to learn and has immediate effect.

From deep in the pit of the stomach breathe in for 7 quick seconds and then breathe out for 11 seconds. Do this 5, 6, 7 times and see the reaction. The reason behind this is that breathing in stimulates the nervous system, while breathing out relaxes us. By breathing out more than we are breathing in, we can increase our level of relaxation.

Clenched Fists

This is a simple technique from Yoga. It works on a simple principle. If you tense muscles and then relax them, they are more relaxed after you have just tensed them.

First, make your hands into tight fists... as tight as possible. Notice the tension in the muscles of the fingers. Become aware of the hardness of your fingernails in the palm of your hands. Notice the skin stretched across the knuckles and how your wrists have become rigid.

Now relax your hands. When you do... really concentrate on the change between tension and relaxation. When you are really concentrating, relax those hands and fingers. The relaxed feeling is now going up your arms to your shoulders. In a few minutes it will spread to your whole body. You don't have to say anything or do anything. Let the relaxation flow.

You may have other ways that help you relax. Yoga, a hot bath, exercise are examples.

The important thing to say is when you find techniques that work for you, keep using them.

Looking after ourselves

You often hear this advice to people under stress: look after yourself. There are things you can do to improve your sense of well-being.

Here are things we should do regularly.

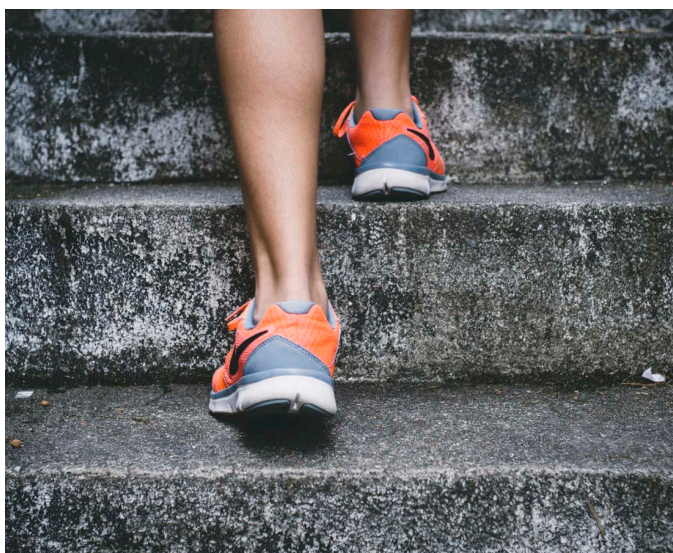
Accepting who you are: Our beliefs, background, culture, religion, sexuality and experiences make us who we are. Everyone is entitled to respect, including you.

Talking about our struggles: Most people feel isolated and overwhelmed by their problems sometimes – it can help to share your feelings. Al-Anon is a good source of people who will listen. If you feel there is no one to talk to, you could call a helpline.

Keeping in touch with friends: You don't have to be strong and struggle on alone. Friends are important, especially at difficult times. Keep in touch.

Getting involved: Meeting new people and getting involved in things can make all the difference for you and others.

Keeping active: Regular exercise really helps if you're feeling depressed or anxious. It can give you more energy too. Find something you enjoy – sport, swimming, walking, cycling or dancing.



Drinking in moderation: Drinking alcohol to deal with any problem will only make things worse. If you do drink yourself, use in moderation and avoid binges. If you're worried about your own drinking speak to someone like your GP.

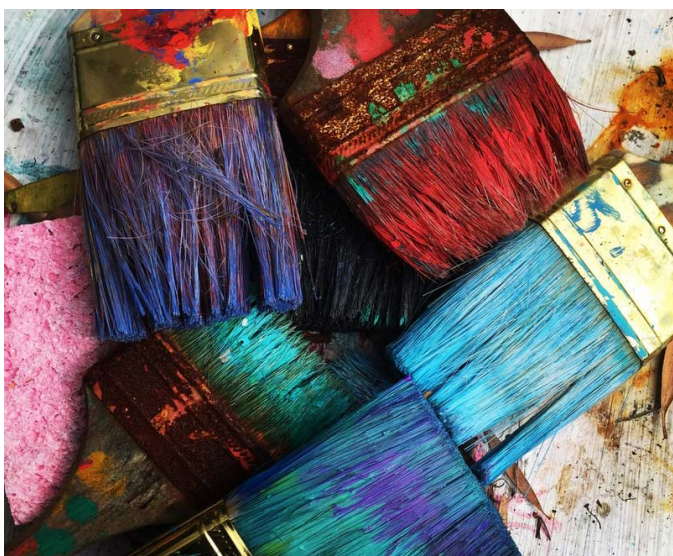
Learning new skills: Learning a new skill can increase your confidence whether it's for pleasure, to make new friends or improve your chances of a job.

Doing something creative: All kinds of creative things can help if you are anxious or low. It can also increase your confidence. Music, writing, painting, drawing, poetry, cooking, gardening – experiment to find something you enjoy.

Relaxing: Try and make time for yourself. Fit things into your day that help you unwind – reading, listening to music, prayer or meditation – whatever you enjoy and find relaxing.

Surviving: When times are difficult, it is sometimes all we can do to survive. Take one day at a time and don't be too hard on yourself. Take time out if you need it.

Asking for help: Everyone needs help from time to time. It's ok to ask for help, even though it feels difficult. With this being a challenge for some people, it will be useful to look at asking for help in more detail.



Building Support

We all need help at some time in our lives. Young or old, there are times we may need practical, emotional or even medical help.

People living with the chronic stress that follows addiction are no different. Yet there are times when help may be difficult to ask for. Some people prefer to solve problems on their own. Occasionally however, life piles on too many stresses at once. Circumstances may overwhelm our usual coping skills.

Pride or fear may stop us asking for help. There may be some other rules at work that stop us asking for help. These rules are beliefs that we learn and follow like a code.

They include:

Keep things to yourself “Why burden others with your problems”. “Other people don’t really care and even if they do, how can they help me?”

People should be independent the origins of this myth lie in the strong silent type that is often portrayed as the heroic loner: These people don’t have needs, only duty.

People will think less of me if I ask for help Some people think asking for help is a sign of weakness. They think they should not do anything that says, “I am vulnerable”. This is just not true. It takes strength to ask for help.

Some kinds of help are easier to ask for than others. To ask someone to help move a cabinet is often easier than wanting to talk because we are hurt, sad or angry. When it comes to our physical and emotional health, it is easier to ask for help for anything from the neck down. The head and our emotions are a lot harder. There can be gender differences here too. Women often, (but not always) find it easier to ask for help.

It helps to have a good support, people you can rely on when things get difficult.

A special note about children

Adults can sometimes underestimate children. Just because they are young, don't assume they do not realise when things are difficult. They notice far more than we think. Children as young as five know what being drunk means. They need information to help them deal with what they are living with. Explaining addiction to children can be a challenge. Information needs to be appropriate to their age.

Preschool children and children in the early school years understand simple, short sentences. They need concrete information and not too much technical language.

Older school-aged children can handle more information. They might already have had drug information sessions at school. Be prepared to answer their questions honestly.

Teenagers can manage most information. They will have had drug awareness lessons at school, and may have questions about the substance their relative is using. Teenagers need to discuss their own thoughts and feelings about the situation. They may worry about what other people, especially their friends, think of them and their family. Sharing information encourages teenagers to talk and to openly ask questions.

The things that hurt children most are:

- Wondering if they are the cause of their parent's drinking or drug use.
- Not being able to depend on parents to provide necessities and to keep promises.
- Feeling confused, frightened and uncertain of what may happen next.
- Being unable to cope with school work because of worry and tiredness.
- Sensing a bad atmosphere at home, finding themselves involved in or seeing fights and arguments, or being kept awake by them.
- Feeling they can't talk to their drinking or drug using parent about their worries in case it makes them angry.
- Feeling they can't talk to their sober parent because he/she is always irritable or exhausted from worrying about and caring for the other parent.
- Losing friends and interests, and not being able to bring friends home in case their parents do something to embarrass them.
- Resentment at having to do more than their fair share of jobs around the house, look after brothers or sisters.
- Fear of being hurt, unloved, or abandoned.
- Fear of losing a parent through death or prison.

(Adapted from Alcohol Concern's web page Making Sense of Alcohol www.alcoholandfamilies.org.uk)

You can help your children in many ways.

You can:

- Help them learn about alcohol, drugs and addiction in ways appropriate for their age.
- Let children know that the family member has a problem with alcohol or other drug use. Explain that this affects the person's behaviour, mood and judgment. When the person is using, they may say or do things that they wouldn't do if sober.
- Reassure children that they did not cause the problem. Children may blame themselves for the person's problem. Explain that no matter what their behaviour, they did not cause the person to drink or use drugs. They also cannot change or stop the way the person behaves. Children may need to hear this often.
- Encourage children to continue with regular routines and to find other activities and interests outside the home that they enjoy. Allow children to be children. They should not take on the problems of the family home.
- Help children to identify a trusted adult whom they can contact if they need someone to talk to or feel unsafe. Letting children work out who to ask for help can make them feel less isolated and more empowered. Make sure the person knows that the child may call, and that the child has that person's number.
- Help them feel loved and listened to.
- Help them know that there are other families with similar difficulties.
- Talk about what you are doing to cope
- Teach by example. Talk about how you feel, but don't burden them with adult problems and responsibilities. Help them identify and express their feelings.
- Prepare them to be able to cope with emergencies. And who to turn to for help.

While keeping things stable for children is important, it can be a struggle for the non - drinking or drug using parent or family member. You can only do the best you can. That is why support for you is so important.

Additional reading and resources

Books for Children

An Elephant in the Living Room - The Children's Book by Jill M. Hastings by Marion H. Typpo

Something Is Wrong at My House by Diane Davis My Dad Loves Me, My Dad Has a Disease:

A Child's View: Living with Addiction by Claudia Black I Wish Daddy Didn't Drink So Much by Judith Vigna

Books for Adults

Risk and Resilience: Adults who were the children of problem drinking. By Jim Orford and Richard Velleman, 1999, Hawood.

It Will Never Happen to Me: Growing Up With Addiction As Youngsters, Adolescents, Adults by Claudia Black

Adult Children of Alcoholics by Janet Woititz

Silent Voices, Supporting children and young people affected by parental alcohol misuse. Office of the Children's Commissioner for England.

Styles of coping was taken from: Methods for reducing alcohol and drug related family harm in non-specialist settings, Alex Copello, Jim Orford, Richard Velleman, Lorna Templeton and Myra Krishnan, Journal of Mental Health, (2000), 9, 3. 329-343.

Coping with alcohol and drug Problems, the experiences of Family Members in Three Contrasting Cultures, Jim Orford, et al , Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, 2005.

The language of resiliency is adopted from A Guide to Promoting Resilience in Children: Strengthening the Human Spirit (1995), Edith Grotberg from the Early Childhood Development: Practice and Reflection Series, Bernard Van Leer Foundation.

Contact Details

If you would to contact the service and be involved with your loved one's treatment and care plan (with consent), or have any questions or simply need advice please contact us by:

Website: www.therecoverytrust.co.uk

Phone: 0300 111 5577

Email: help@therecoverytrust.co.uk

Webchat: Available 9am until 10pm, 7 days per week

