

5 Things You Can Do to Help Someone Struggling with Addiction

It hurts to see a loved one struggle with addiction. It's a terrible disorder that leaves a trail of broken lives in its path, and it's far from uncommon. Substance abuse disorder and addiction are recognized as [mental illnesses](#) that afflict [21 million Americans](#) every year. It's a treatable condition, but only 10 percent of those with substance addiction disorders get the help they need.

One of the keys to a person getting clean is good social support. A lack of a support system makes getting into [recovery](#) much more difficult, so if you're in a position to help a loved one fighting addiction, it's a wonderful thing to do.

But helping someone with an addiction can be challenging, as the disease itself sabotages an addict's ability to maintain relationships of any sort. For a person with addiction, their relationship with their drug of choice tends to override everything else.

But you can still help.

Some Facts about Addiction that Affect How You Can Help

Understanding how addiction forms and how it affects a person is the first step to helping a person fighting addiction. Note that no one chooses to become an addict. Substance addiction doesn't arise from a weak character or lack of willpower or loss of self-control. Alcoholism, substance abuse, and substance addiction are psychological disorders that have their roots in biological and environmental causes. Researchers in addiction know that the [nerve pathways](#) that control the learning, pleasure, and reward systems in the brain don't work correctly in those with addiction.

There is also a component to addiction that may be genetic. Studies have also shown that people with addiction problems in their [immediate family](#) also tend to have those problems, even when they're not raised in the same environment.

Addiction also changes the [structure of the brain](#) on a small but impactful level. When a person gets into recovery and stops abusing substances, the brain doesn't heal the changes caused by addiction rapidly. Healing occurs, but it can take one to three years or more for a person's nervous system to completely return to its pre-addiction health. Don't let that discourage you from helping. As little as a few months of sobriety will produce huge improvements in an addicted person's health and psychological well-being.

It's the lengthy nature of healing from addiction that requires that a person helping an addict be patient and persistent.

Finally, be aware that addiction tends to occur [along with other psychological disorders](#), including depression, anxiety, and bipolar disorder. People who have been diagnosed with both addiction and another psychological disorder are referred to as dual-diagnosis patients.

Helping Someone with Addiction

A person in active addiction who's fighting to get clean needs all the help they can get. These are just a few ways to give them some assistance.

1. **Educate yourself about addiction.** Addiction is a complex disorder and the more you know about it, the better you'll be able to provide support to someone living with addiction. Some useful resources are located at the [Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration \(SAMHSA\)](#) and the [National Institute for Drug Addiction \(NIDA\)](#). You can find specialized information about alcohol abuse and alcoholism at the [National Institute for Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism](#).
2. **Encourage treatment and have resources to offer.** Find out what addiction recovery resources are available in your area and offer to help your friend or loved one access them. It's a good idea to have the names and phone numbers of treatment resources with you when you speak to your friend or loved one. If they ask for help, having a concrete plan in place will help get them into treatment more rapidly. Just handing a person a brochure won't help; it's important that you be able to discuss treatment options.
3. **Be compassionate and patient.** Be compassionate and refrain from being judgmental. Avoid a "fix-it-quick" approach. Often, a person with addiction issues will need to open up without someone immediately trying to fix their problems. Instead of trying to solve every problem the addicted person has right off the bat, pay some attention to the emotions that underly what the person is saying and validate those feelings.
4. **Set boundaries and keep them.** Boundaries are the guidelines or rules we establish as to what's appropriate and inappropriate behavior. For example, if you offer an addicted friend a place to stay, one appropriate boundary would be no drugs in your home.

Good boundaries will keep you from enabling your loved one. Enabling involves taking actions that prevent the addict from experiencing the negative consequences of their bad decisions. It's the awful consequences that often prove to be the most motivating factor in a person deciding to get into recovery.

5. **Stay involved by learning about recovery.** Learning about what recovery means and how it happens will help you be a more effective supporter. [Recovery](#) is the process by which an addicted person abstains from using drugs while continuing to strive for a more fulfilling life. It is a gradual and incremental process that starts when a person quits abusing substances, but that's only the first step. By continuing to offer your patient and nonjudgmental assistance, you can make a world of difference in a person's long-term recovery.

The takeaway

Addiction disorders are a family of mental illnesses in which a person compulsively consumes mind-altering substances, even though the consequences of their behaviors are negative, even

life-threatening. Good social support is one of the most important factors in a person's getting into recovery from addiction. You can be a supportive person in many ways, but in all instances, becoming educated about addiction and recovery will allow you to provide the most help for your loved one.

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