

# Supporting Someone With Substance Use Disorder

Having substance use disorder means that a person's repeated drug or alcohol use interferes with his or her ability to be productive. Alcohol or drug use may interfere with relationships and everyday activities, such as work or school. When a person has substance disorder, his or her condition can affect others around him or her, such as friends and family members. Friends and family can help by offering support and understanding.

## What do I need to know about this condition?

Substance use disorder can cause problems with mental and physical health. It can affect a person's ability to have healthy relationships and to meet responsibilities at home and at work or school. It can also lead to addiction.

Symptoms associated with substance use disorder include:

- Using a substance more than is normal.
- Craving the substance or always thinking about it.
- Trouble stopping substance use.
- Spending a significant amount of time getting the substance, using it, or recovering from its effects.
- Needing more and more of the substance to get the same effect (*developing a tolerance*).
- Experiencing consequences of substance use, such as:
  - Poor performance at work or school.
  - Relationship problems.
  - Financial or legal problems.
  - Health problems.

The most commonly abused substances include:

- Alcohol.
- Tobacco.
- Marijuana.
- Stimulants, such as cocaine and methamphetamine.
- Hallucinogens, such as LSD and PCP.
- Opioids, such as some prescription pain medicines and heroin.

## What do I need to know about the treatment options?

Treatment for substance use disorder and recovery can be a long process. Your loved one's treatment may involve:

- Stopping substance use safely. This may require taking medicines and being closely observed for several days.
- Group or individual counseling from mental health providers. Your loved one may attend daily counseling sessions at a treatment center.
- Staying at a residential treatment center for several days or weeks.



- Going to a support group. These groups are an important part of long-term recovery for many people. They include 12-step programs like Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) and Narcotics Anonymous (NA).

Many people who undergo treatment start using the substance again after stopping. This is called a relapse. If your loved one has a relapse, that does **not** mean that treatment will not work. Keep in mind that:

- This disorder involves the brain, the body, and the people in a person's life (*social system*). Changing unhealthy behaviors is a complicated process that requires determination from your loved one.
- Your loved one may need to try several times to recover.
- Your support is important in helping your loved one to recover.

A responsible adult may need to stay with your loved one for some time after treatment. This person can help your loved one stay on track with recovery and can watch for symptoms that are getting worse.

## How can I support my loved one?

### Talk about the condition

- Be careful about too much prodding. Try not to overdo reminders to an adult friend or family member about things like taking medicines. Ask how your loved one prefers that you help.
- Explain that it is not easy to quit because substance use can change the part of the brain that gives someone self-control. Also, some people can easily become addicted because of their family genes.
- **Never** ignore comments about suicide, and **do not** try to avoid the subject of suicide. Talking about suicide will not make your loved one want to act on it. You or your loved one can reach out 24 hours a day to get free, private support (on the phone or a live online chat) from a suicide crisis helpline, such as the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-8255.
- Ask your loved one if you can go with him or her to meet with his or her health care provider or therapist. Ask if your loved one is open to giving you written permission to communicate with his or her providers if your loved one has problems.

### Find support and resources

- Work with a health care provider who specializes in substance use disorders. Your loved one's primary care provider may be able to recommend a provider.
- Refer your loved one to trusted online resources that can provide information about substance use disorders. A health care provider may be able to recommend resources. You could start with:
  - Government sites such as the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA): [www.samhsa.gov](http://www.samhsa.gov)
  - National mental health organizations such as the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI): [www.nami.org](http://www.nami.org)
- Look into local support groups or 12-step programs for your loved one.
- Connect with people in peer and family support groups. People in these groups understand what you and your loved one are going through. They can help you feel a sense of comfort and connect you with local resources to help you learn more.

### General support

- Make an effort to learn all you can about substance use disorder.

- Help your loved one follow his or her treatment plan as directed by health care providers. This could mean driving him or her to therapy sessions or support group meetings.
- Tell your loved one that you will keep giving support as long as he or she follows the treatment plan.
- Assure your loved one that even though treatment may be hard, it often works. Substance use disorder can be managed.
- Encourage your loved one to avoid things, people, and situations (*triggers*) that may cause a relapse.
- Talk with your loved one's treatment center staff or health care provider about how you can keep supporting your loved one during treatment, recovery, and relapses if necessary.

### **How can I create a safe environment?**

- Talk with your loved one's health care provider about ways to lower the risk of harm. Based on the type of substance that your loved one is struggling with, his or her health care provider may recommend safety measures such as:
  - Vaccinations.
  - Medicines to prevent death from overdose.
  - Referrals for a clean needle exchange program.
  - Sexual health counseling.
- If you believe that your loved one is driving while using drugs or alcohol, it is important to confront him or her about the dangers of driving while drunk or high. In some cases, you may need to call the police to prevent harm to your loved one or others.

### **How should I care for myself?**

It is important to find ways to care for your body, mind, and well-being while supporting someone with substance use disorder.

- Join a support group for family members of addicts. Your loved one's treatment center may offer family support groups and other programs.
- Consider individual therapy to help you learn to cope with your loved one's disorder.
- Try to maintain your normal routines. This can help you remember that your life is about more than your loved one's condition.
- Make time for activities that help you relax, and try to not feel guilty about taking time for yourself.
- Be clear about limits and boundaries, especially if your loved one's behavior affects your well-being. Say "no" to requests or events that lead to a schedule that is too busy.
- Eat a healthy diet, exercise regularly, and get plenty of sleep.

### **What are some signs that the condition is getting worse?**

Signs that your loved one's condition may be getting worse include:

- New or more frequent symptoms.
- Continuing to use more and more of the substance over time.
- Continuing to use the substance even after using it has had negative consequences.
- Denying that he or she has a problem.
- Blaming you or others for his or her use.
- Missing work or school or important events.
- Physical symptoms that are associated with continued substance use.
- A feeling in you that you are powerless to help your loved one get better.

## **Get help right away if:**

- Your loved one is showing signs that he or she is thinking about hurting himself, herself, or someone else.

**If you ever feel like your loved one may hurt himself or herself or others, or may have thoughts about taking his or her own life, get help right away. You can go to your nearest emergency department or call:**

- **Your local emergency services (911 in the U.S.).**
- **A suicide crisis helpline, such as the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-8255. This is open 24 hours a day.**

## **Summary**

- Having substance use disorder means that a person's repeated drug or alcohol use interferes with his or her ability to be productive.
- Substance use disorder can be treated with therapy, group counseling, medicine, or staying at a residential treatment center.
- Support from close friends and family members is vital for your loved one to overcome substance use disorder. The support that you provide can help your loved one through the tough treatment and recovery process.
- It is important to find ways to care for yourself while supporting someone with substance use disorder.

This information is not intended to replace advice given to you by your health care provider. Make sure you discuss any questions you have with your health care provider.