

Coping with a loved one's addiction **(drugs, alcohol, gambling, etc.)**

The loved ones of people with addictions often find themselves dealing alone with what can be an extremely difficult problem. Yet they too may need help dealing with this painful situation and a variety of related issues.

A confronting realization

Of course, to make a full recovery, the person living with an addiction must first try to understand the underlying reason for the addictive behaviour and the unhappiness it may hide. But they must be willing to do that – no-one else can force them to do so - and it is vital to understand that the addiction is only the tip of the iceberg. You may think it is your role to advise the person and to tell them what to do. But you must never forget that you cannot fully understand what the other person is going through and that, whether you like it or not, he or she has every right to make choices you may disagree with. But what you can do is to ask yourself some difficult questions: why is somebody close to me (a spouse or a child, for example) going through this? What can I learn about myself? Does it have some connection with my own past experiences?

Of course, it's not easy to accept that we may be projecting on others aspects of ourselves that we also need to work on.

How can all this affect you?

- Being in a codependent relationship, i.e. wanting to save the other person with all the repercussions that can entail;
- Feeling helpless, ashamed, and/or guilty;
- Having physical and/or psychological reactions (exhaustion, an adjustment disorder, anxiety, depression, etc.);
- Having difficulty managing stress;
- Having trouble setting limits and standing up for yourself;
- Experiencing marital and/or family conflicts;
- Having financial problems, etc.

What can you do?

Don't try to change the other person.

It's important to understand that you have neither the power nor the responsibility nor the control over that other person to change them.

What you can do, however, is think about your own attitudes and behaviours in connection with that person, to figure out why their behaviour is upsetting to you, and to find links with your own past experience. Such links are not unusual.

For example, did you have an alcoholic parent who was not there for you when you were a child? Are you trying to fill that emotional void and heal past wounds through your relationship with your life partner? Did you try to help a brother with a gambling problem, with money or in other ways? And do you feel that this was a waste of time and money, that he wasn't grateful for what you did, and that he should have immediately given up gambling thanks to your efforts? Are you disappointed by the path your teenager is following? Are you really trying to understand what your child is trying to tell you through his or her behaviour? Are you too demanding, or do you have trouble accepting their choices without trying to force them to accept yours?

Identify patterns and your own limits.

You need to identify recurring patterns in your current relationship because that will help you focus on the areas you need to work on yourself. There may be several possibilities. Above all, you must stop trying to control the other person and focus on your own life rather than on theirs.

You can try to understand what you can do for your loved one, what they really want from you, and to respect their wishes. But first you need to set your own limits and clearly communicate those limits to them.

Seek assistance.

You may also decide to seek help for yourself by reading self-help books, consulting a therapist (psychologist, social worker, etc.), or participating in group therapy sessions.

In conclusion

There are no easy solutions for dealing with a person with an addiction, but this short article offers a few suggestions. We hope it will help you to stop trying to control the behaviour of your loved one by telling them what they should or shouldn't do and to try to understand your own reactions, instead.

It's also important to understand that, in such situations, the entire family and its dynamics are generally affected and involved. So, in some way, every person has a role to play in both the problem and the solution.

From this perspective, every person can be a link in the chain, accept their share of responsibility, and, in the end, affect the outcome. In any case, don't hesitate to consult a professional in your employee assistance program.

*Ms. Éthel Tracy, M. Ps., psychologist, and
Les Consultants Longpré & Associés Inc.*

