

What Every Family Needs to Know To Help a Loved One Overcome Addiction

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Overcoming Addiction

Have you ever felt like addiction has overtaken your life? Even if you're not an addict, it is likely that someone you know or care about is. Their behavior may be heartbreaking. Understanding the person dependent on drugs or alcohol can be difficult. "Why do they act the way that they do?" "How can they live like that?" These are questions you may have asked yourself.

There is hope. For the past decade and a half, I have been involved in addiction recovery, observing addicts and conducting research in the field. My research looks at the processes people use to create completely changed lives that include lasting sobriety. I want to use my experience to help you find lasting recovery for yourself or a loved one who suffers from addiction.

Following are some of the important topics with which someone considering addiction treatment needs to be familiar.

Understanding Addiction

Addiction Defined

Alcohol, drugs, and even many behaviors (such as eating disorders) fall under the classification of "addictive."

Let's cut straight through the jargon. According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, addiction is the "compulsive need for and use of a habit-forming substance..." Does your loved one seek his/her drug of choice even when there are significant negative consequences? If so, your loved one might be an addict.

A second, simple way to discern whether or not you're dealing with addiction is as follows. If your loved one can be honest with himself, have him answer these two questions. First, when you drink or use drugs, can you control how much you use *every* time you use? Second, can you predict what will happen when you use your drug of choice? (In other words, do you know that you will have only one glass of wine

What Every Family Needs to Know To Help a Loved One Overcome Addiction

with dinner and then watch a movie, or once you start drinking, are all bets off?) If you cannot control your drug intake or predict your behavior when you use, you likely have a problem.

A third definition is this: If you cannot enjoy AND control your drinking or drug use, you probably have a problem.

Addiction is no more complicated to understand than that. If a substance or behavior becomes more important than the relationships in your life, addiction is an issue.

Relating to the Addict

You don't need a clinical definition of addiction to recognize that one of your family members or friends has a severe issue. But as you well know, interacting with someone who is addicted to alcohol or drugs is at best a challenge. Allow me to take you for a moment into the mind of an addict to help you understand her worldview.

The addict lives in the tension between denial and death. Sometimes, she believes that nothing can touch her. At other times, depending on how far her addiction has progressed and how many people around her have already died from addiction, she will know that she is on death's door. The addict may or may not be able to tell you this. She is like a child whistling in the dark when she tells you she doesn't have a problem...because she lives in a constant state of fear that her drug either will not be available to her and she'll get sick or on her next binge she won't be as lucky as on her last. If you can understand this tension, you will go a long way toward understanding the addict's mind.

That said, perhaps the only thing more frightening to an addict than dying is treatment. *The addict does not know how to live without his drug.* Dying is a natural progression of addiction. Treatment is a foreign idea. The addict isolates in part to protect his habit and in part to protect those he still loves from watching him die. The addict in the throes of addiction does not believe recovery is possible.

To help the addict you love, you must replace the addict's isolation with support and accountability. This is what interventions try to do; in an intervention, the family says to the addict, "We love you enough that we are going to be here for you as you recover and you will be accountable to us if you do not."

Providing the addict with a promise of emotional support and accountability gives your loved one something to hold onto as she delves into the unknown.

What Every Family Needs to Know To Help a Loved One Overcome Addiction

Please note, that in order to provide this support to an addict, you likely will need counseling and guidance also. The addict is not alone in practicing her addiction. The entire family system must change for the addict to recover long-term.

There is Hope

Perhaps the most important thing to remember during this process is that there is hope for your loved one to recover. He may not believe it, but you must. There is an old saying, “While there is breath, there is hope.” So long as the one you love lives, help is possible.

The Life Saving Support Addicts Receive in Treatment

Addicts rarely get better without treatment. That’s not to say that none will. Some addicts will recover using only a 12 step program. Some will use psychological counseling. Others will seek church or clergy led programs or the practice of martial arts. I even know a few people who swear they quit cold turkey and never looked back. But the vast majority of people who overcome addiction for the long term after a single stint in rehab, are those who participate in in-patient, multi-staged programs, often 90 days or more in duration.

Why does the addict need so much help?

Stages of Change

There is a theory called the “Stages of Change” model.¹ It was created based on the research of James Prochaska at the University of Rhode Island and his colleagues, beginning in the 1970s, forming into a complete model in the 1990s. What Prochaska found was that for those who want to make a significant change in their lives, there is a series of “stages” that make that change possible. The theory begins with “pre-contemplation,” a stage where you don’t even know there is a problem; this would be the addict in denial. It ends with a stage called “termination” or “transcendence,” in which the problem literally no longer exists. This is the stage of the person who was a smoker forty years ago and doesn’t consider smoking an option in his life no matter what trials or circumstances he faces.

¹ This model is also called the Transtheoretical model or TTM.

What Every Family Needs to Know To Help a Loved One Overcome Addiction

Though the Stages of Change model has come under fire from some scholars, particularly those who suggest that there are other factors that can complicate or undermine a person's efforts to change, addiction treatment centers have found that in conjunction with other treatment protocols, the Stages of Change model is a proven tool to support long term sobriety. Therapists who use the Stages of Change model, along with other interventions, are able to help an addict deepen her commitment to change and prepare for difficult situations when relapse is possible. The Stages of Change model has a strong evidence-base in addiction treatment.

Evidence-Based Treatment

You will read a great deal about "evidence-based" treatment programs in your research on addiction. What does this mean?

Evidence-based is a technical way of saying, "researched." When a treatment center speaks of its evidence based protocols, it is letting you know that the medical or psychological research indicates that the treatments the center uses are the industry's best practices, those proven to be most effective.

It is important to choose a treatment facility that uses evidence-based treatment activities. Doing so will give you peace of mind that your loved one is receiving the treatment scientifically shown to be successful.

Psychotherapy

People rarely "party" themselves into addiction. People who use drugs or alcohol recreationally, to have a good time, generally stop using a substance when they are no longer having fun. That is not addiction.

The vast majority of addicts abuse drugs or alcohol because they lack sufficient, appropriate coping mechanisms to deal with traumatic or difficult circumstances. What causes a person to pick up a substance is varied. The addict could have suffered the loss of a loved one, rape, child abuse, bullying, war, or any number of other issues. In some way, the addict was either traumatized and/or did not get his needs met consistently enough to develop positive coping skills. In all these cases, psychotherapy focused on helping an individual understand why he became an addict, is useful. One goal of this practice is to help the addict to process the pain and loss of the past. Another goal is to find alternative coping

What Every Family Needs to Know To Help a Loved One Overcome Addiction

mechanisms for dealing with future problems. The best treatment centers provide extensive, individual counseling as well as other therapies to help addicts face the issues that caused them to turn to substances.

Replacing Negative Habits with Positive Activities

If you ask an addict simply to stop using, the odds are poor that she will be successful. An addict who spends her entire day chasing a high or being high needs something positive to do with her time. It is essential to understand that negative habits are not “broken” so much as replaced with positive activities.

Top treatment centers will have a number of activities that will help the addict to heal physically, emotionally/mentally, and spiritually.

Addicts rarely enter treatment in a positive state of physical health. Addicts must be re-taught how to nourish themselves and exercise appropriately. The elite treatment centers will provide offerings far beyond nutritious meals and a place to walk. You will find facilities that include state of the art gyms with personal trainers and yoga instruction, along with gourmet chefs catering to any dietary need (vegetarian, gluten-free, kosher, etc.) and even orthomolecular therapy.² Additionally, many facilities offer acupuncture and massage, to help the body return to health.

Mental health goes beyond psychotherapy. Most addicts have lost sight of the passions they once had in life. Many treatment facilities provide opportunities for positive recreational activities – from art studios/classes to bicycle riding to singing. Addicts re-learn how to participate in and enjoy what were once pleasurable activities, like bowling or going to the movies, without getting loaded.

Spirituality is a tricky subject to address. Some addicts want to hear nothing about God; others come from deeply religious traditions to which they cling. Whatever an addict’s preferences, treatment centers all will address the issue of healing the spirit. This will likely include meditative practices, deep breathing exercises, and personal reflections. Choosing the right treatment center for the person you love means matching the treatment center’s mission with the addict’s personal beliefs. For example, a church-sponsored treatment center may not be the best choice for an avowed atheist.

²Orthomolecular therapy is a medicine based on the inclusion of dietary supplements.

What Every Family Needs to Know To Help a Loved One Overcome Addiction

Co-Occurring Disorders

Some addicts have only one core problem: addiction. Many, however, present with a host of other issues. These are called “co-occurring disorders.” A co-occurring disorder can include but is not limited to: clinical depression, anxiety, eating disorders, sexual acting out, self-harm (e.g. cutting), pain syndromes, physical traumas, and psychiatric disorders such as schizophrenia or PTSD. *Not every treatment center is prepared to address these issues.* In fact, many are not. If your loved one has been diagnosed with or you suspect may have a co-occurring disorder, discuss the issue frankly with the admissions staff at any treatment center you are considering. No treatment center is “best” if they are not best for you – and that means treating all the issues your loved one faces.

For the Family

Setting Boundaries

Your loved one will recover or not – and his recovery has absolutely nothing to do with you. That’s hard to hear, but it is true. Whether your loved one overcomes addiction or not, you must take care of yourself.

The best thing you can do for yourself and the addict you love is to set strong, loving boundaries. This means saying clearly and firmly that you will no longer participate in activities that support the addict’s addiction.

How do you set boundaries? First, articulate clear guidelines of what you will and will not do for your loved one. Perhaps you will no longer pay for a grown child’s cell phone and car or you will not cover for your spouse by lying to his employer when he cannot show up to work. Second, you will need to get support for yourself. There are local support groups, professional therapists, crisis centers and clergy who are available to support you in this process. If you are financially dependent on your loved one or fear for your safety, you should consider immediate steps to ensure your financial and physical safety. This could include setting aside money and making an escape plan, if necessary. Finally, consider engaging in activities that don’t involve your addicted loved one. Attend church. Ride a horse. Go to the movies. Take a walk. Do something that requires you to turn off your cell phone so the addict cannot reach you for awhile; enjoy your life. You deserve to get back your joy for living.

What Every Family Needs to Know To Help a Loved One Overcome Addiction

Interventions

An intervention is simply a time when the family gets together to say to the addict, “Enough is enough. We want you to get better and we’re here to help you recover.” Though dramatically staged for television, interventions are really just an opportunity to tell your loved one that you are ready to be an ally in recovery.

Many, if not most, treatment centers provide professional interventionists to help you hold an intervention. Interventionists are usually individuals in recovery themselves who mediate the intervention, allowing everyone to speak and urging or escorting the addict to treatment.

How the intervention is conducted will depend on the needs of the addict and the personality and style of the interventionist. No matter how the intervention is structured, the goal is always to convince the addict immediately to go to treatment at a facility that has a waiting bed.

Supporting an Addict in Early Recovery

Supporting an addict in early recovery begins from the time he goes into treatment. If at all possible, it is important for you to get professional help to learn how to set appropriate boundaries with the ones you love. Hopefully, you will participate in the family aspects of the treatment program offered by your loved one’s treatment facility. These are first steps toward changing the family dynamic to one in which addiction is not fostered.

Before the addict returns home, clear out his home of all mood/mind altering substances. Look for secret stashes as well as items in the medicine cabinet that can facilitate relapse. This could mean making personal sacrifices, such as eliminating your prized wine collection. However, making the home environment safe is critical to supporting your loved one.

Family Systems – Helping the Whole Family

Many times, families believe that it is only the addict who has a problem. If the addict gets better, they reason, the problem is resolved. These families offer up the “sick” family member to the therapist or treatment center with the direction, “Fix him!” -- Recovery from addiction does not work like that.

What Every Family Needs to Know To Help a Loved One Overcome Addiction

There are relationships within the family that cause family members to behave with one another in the ways that they do. Changing these relationships, so that the entire family functions in a healthier way, should be a family's goal when one or more members is in a treatment facility.

The family might consider "family systems" counseling. The goal of family systems therapy is to help family members understand and take responsibility for how the family group functions. By learning to recognize charged situations and interactions, as well as how anxiety and conflict build within the family, family members can learn to manage their emotions and relationships in more appropriate ways. These better functioning relationships may diminish some of the causes of conflict in the family, thereby helping to prevent relapse by the addict.

After Treatment

What to Expect in the Family

Things may be awkward when your loved one returns home. You may be resentful that you were left home paying bills, taking care of children, and otherwise keeping a household running. You may feel that you are walking on eggshells around the addict, in fear that she will relapse. These are reasonable emotions to have. Share them with your therapist, friends, support group, and when appropriate, your loved one. Open and honest communication can foster the recovery process.

Balance is important not only for you, but also for the recovering addict. Schedule time for therapy, work, recreation, and spiritual pursuits. Plan time together, with friends, and alone. You will need it.

Finally, you have the right to expect accountability, for your loved one to be accountable for his actions and whereabouts. While it is not appropriate to stalk your loved one, it is acceptable to expect to know where he is, who he's with, and what he's doing. If he says he'll be home at ten, he should be home at ten or call to let you know what's going on that will delay him. These are reasonable expectations that show respect. An addict who is unwilling to be accountable or angrily resents you for asking for such respect is likely not being honest and headed for relapse.

What Every Family Needs to Know To Help a Loved One Overcome Addiction

The Myth of Necessary Relapse

There is an adage in the addiction treatment community that “relapse is a part of recovery.” That statement is only partially true.

Yes, it is true that many addicts relapse after a stay in a treatment program. It is also true that a brief relapse need not be cause for alarm. There are times early in recovery when an addict makes a poor choice, relapses, and immediately begins the recovery process again. These are not unusual experiences for an addict who returns home from treatment.

However, relapse is not a *necessary* part of recovery. Thousands upon thousands of addicts leave treatment, do the work that is suggested of them, and do not relapse. This is also a perfectly normal experience.

Do not be afraid of relapse or allow it to be a tool for manipulation. The addict will return to a using life or not, depending on her own choices, not yours. Encourage your loved one, but do not live in fear that relapse is inevitable.

Finding the Right Treatment Center

If you're ready to take the next step in finding help for yourself or someone you love, it's time to choose a treatment facility.

If you have medical insurance that covers addiction treatment, you should explore what those benefits cover. This will give you some indication of which treatment centers you can afford. Feel free to call a treatment center you are considering using and ask for their help in understanding your insurance benefits. Many have dedicated full time staff members that will negotiate with your insurance company to find out what your maximum benefit is. They have experience working with insurance companies and are there to help you clarify exactly which services your loved one is entitled to.

Look for a facility that offers a wide variety of programs and services, has fully qualified counselors, and at least three hours of individual therapy a week. *This is the most important part of your research.* Your loved one is entering treatment to recover from addiction. Her days should be filled with psychotherapy,

What Every Family Needs to Know To Help a Loved One Overcome Addiction

physical activity, meditation, writing – learning how to live a balanced, happy life without drugs or alcohol.

Consider any potential need for a facility that treats co-occurring disorders. Eliminate treatment centers that do not provide services for all your loved one's issues.

Be aware of a treatment center's philosophy. Some are religious-group sponsored. Know whether or not a particular religious view, if that's part of the center's treatment philosophy, will work for your loved one.

Most important, seek out a treatment facility that emphasizes a long term "continuum of care." The most effective treatment centers have programming that evolves with the client's sobriety. These programs are not "28 days and you're back at home," but have graduated levels of care depending on the client's progress. Additionally, you need to know what kind of after-care support and plans are provided by the facility and how the organization responds to relapse.

Once you have found one or two facilities that you believe meet your loved one's needs, call and speak to the intake staff. Ask hard questions. If you do, you will soon become confident in your choice and know that your loved one will be well cared for as he begins his path of recovery.

About the Author

Constance Scharff has a Ph.D. in Transformative Studies, specializing in addiction recovery. She is a researcher with the Institute for Creative Transformation and the world's leading expert on using ecstatic spiritual experience to maintain long-term sobriety. Her ground breaking publication, *"Filling the God-shaped hole: Reframing alcoholism as an opportunity for spiritual transformation,"* is available from UMI Research Press. She is also a Transformative Studies and Addiction Research Consultant for Cliffside Malibu, a leading addiction treatment center. Dr. Scharff writes for a variety of journals and speaks to healing professionals on helping addicts in recovery maintain their sobriety. She has also traveled extensively in Asia, Africa, and North America, learning how to help individuals evoke life-transforming spiritual experiences and use those experiences to heal addictions and trauma. She can be reached at Constance@cliffsidemalibu.com