

WHEN SOMEONE YOU LOVE IS HAVING TROUBLE WITH SUBSTANCES

Most of us have known someone with a substance use disorder, which is problematic use of alcohol and/or drugs. Seeing someone you love suffer can make you feel sad, helpless, and angry. You can't make someone else get better from a substance use disorder, but the more you learn about it, the better equipped you are to help them—and help yourself.

WHAT'S SUBSTANCE USE DISORDER?

Substance use disorder (SUD) is a medical condition that can result from using a particular substance, like alcohol, opioids, cannabis, or cocaine. Someone can develop SUD without being aware of it.



HOW CAN SUBSTANCE USE BE A MEDICAL CONDITION?

Many people can use a substance occasionally or regularly without any problems. However, some people continue to use substances despite negative consequences because it's the only way they feel "normal". **SUD is characterized by the "4 Cs":**

- **CRAVING**
- **CONTROL** of amount or frequency of use
- **COMPULSION** to use
- Use despite **CONSEQUENCES**

WHY DO PEOPLE DEVELOP SUD?

There are many reasons why one person might develop SUD while another doesn't, and everyone's story is unique. People who have experienced trauma or have a family history of addiction are at greater risk, and social factors like poverty can also increase risk. Stigma about substance use can prevent people from asking for help. **It's important to know that SUD isn't related to character, will power, or morals, and has nothing to do with the kind of person someone is.**

WHAT WILL HELP THEM?

Making a change can be hard, especially if the person believes, as many do, that they should be able to do it on their own by "just stopping". But like other illnesses such as depression, SUD is caused by biological, psychological, and social factors, and just like these other illnesses, it's very hard to manage without help. Realizing this is the first, and sometimes the hardest, step towards making a change.



Once someone has decided to make a change, there are many ways to approach problematic substance use. Medication, counselling, and peer support can all be helpful. Your loved one might want to visit a rapid access addiction medicine (RAAM) clinic to discuss their options. There's a list of clinics online at www.metaphi.ca/raam-clinics/. They don't need an appointment—they can just show up during clinic hours.

WHAT SHOULD I DO?

The most important thing for you to do is be clear about your boundaries. You can't make someone else change their behaviour—you only have control over what you choose to do. An example of setting a boundary might be telling your loved one that you won't spend time with them while they're intoxicated. You're not telling your loved one what they can and can't do, you're letting them know what you will and won't do. Learning to accept what you can't change while taking control over your own actions is a powerful way to take care of yourself, and it might make your loved one more aware of the effect that their substance use has on others.

If your loved one is willing to talk about their substance use, here are some suggestions for how to approach the conversation:

1. **Ask.** How do they feel about their substance use?
2. **Empathize.** Tell them you care about them and you're worried. Give a specific example of a negative consequence of their substance use and ask how that consequence made them feel.
3. **Normalize.** Let them know that lots of people struggle with substance use.
4. **Offer options.** Let them know that there are different types of SUD treatment, including medications, that are safe, effective, and can help them feel better. Give them time to think so that they don't feel trapped. Tell them you'll be there if they want to talk.

HOW CAN I GET SUPPORT?

It's important to recognize that someone's substance use can have a major impact on the people that care about them. If you want to be able to help someone else, you have to take care of yourself. You might find it helpful to try counselling and/or a support group so that you have space to talk about your feelings. Here are some resources for support groups, counselling, and education for families:

- CRAFT (<https://helpingfamilieshelp.com/about-craft>)
- Al-Anon (www.al-anon.org)
- Canadian Mental Health Association (www.cmha.ca)
- Psychology today (www.psychologytoday.com)
- ConnexOntario (www.connexontario.ca)
- Families for Addiction Recovery (www.farcanada.org)
- The Sashbear Foundation Family Connections program (www.sashbear.org/en/family-connections)
- Family Association for Mental Health Everywhere (www.fameforfamilies.com)
- Moms Stop the Harm (www.momsstoptheharm.com)

HOW CAN WE MOVE FORWARD IF I'M ANGRY AT THEM?

It makes complete sense to be angry if your loved one has said or done things that have hurt you or broken your trust, and it doesn't help to pretend that things are okay if they're not. On the contrary, it might be helpful for your loved one to learn about the ways in which their behaviour has been harmful to you—it gives them a reason to think about making a change.

Forgiveness doesn't happen overnight. Once your loved one is feeling better, you can start working on reconnecting and rebuilding trust.

HOW CAN I LEARN MORE?

If you have any questions about problematic substance use, you should speak to your health care provider. You can also find more information and resources on the META:PHI website.