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Help! My Loved One is Addicted - What Can I Do?

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Few things are more frustrating than watching someone's life spinning out of control because of substance abuse and addiction. If this same person had cancer, heart disease, or diabetes, they would be willing to do whatever was necessary to treat it. But the addict/alcoholic will both deny the existence of the disease and refuse treatment. This is one of the reasons why addiction is often referred to as a cunning, baffling, and powerful disease.

Now as a concerned loved one, you probably want a clear answer to the question, what do I do?

How can a family member help?

1. Find help
2. Empathize
3. Talk to them about getting help
4. Expect resistance
5. Intervene

Find Help

First, get a friend, family member, or professional involved who has dealt with the dynamics of addiction. The problem is too big to handle on your own. Gaining knowledge through books, seminars, and Al-Anon meetings is a great way to learn more. Whatever resource you use, be sure the person you are listening to is trained or has personal experience with addiction. Psychiatrists, psychologists, and pastors may be helpful only if they have training or experience. In the recent past, none of these professions has required even one class on addiction.

The role of a family member or friend is an important one. Very few men or women seek help for addiction on their own, and most often family and close friends are the ones with the time and energy it takes to intervene. What works? The goal is to help someone to recognize the problem and seek help. How can you do that?

Empathize

No one plans on becoming drug-dependent. There is a stigma or sense of shame that is associated with such a lifestyle. Some in society still think of this as a mental health problem and that addicts are weak, bad, or crazy. So if you begin by trying to understand how this person is thinking and feeling and refrain from judging them, you've already taken a big step in the right direction.

Talk to Them About Getting Help

When talking to someone about this, the best approach is to plan in advance what you are going to say. Ask some questions, and then listen. Mention concerns you may have or changes you have observed in this person. Plan when you will try to talk to him or her, at a time when you won't be interrupted. If you're dealing with an adolescent, make sure you aren't around their friends or peers. My wife and I have learned this the hard way, as we've discovered most teens have an image or persona that must not be challenged around friends. Doing so only invites conflict.

Expect Some Resistance

Even if the person is aware of the problem, they may still not want to quit. Quitting means a lot of change. *The thought of living life substance-free is scary.* When they feel pressure to quit, they might lie about their use, or try to convince you they can do it on their own. They may run away or isolate themselves from friends and family. They also may overcompensate by showing the world how together they are by working harder on the job or getting good grades in school. It may take many conversations spanning a period of several months, so keep the lines of communication as open as you can.

There may be some occasions when you just take a break from trying to help. Much of this will depend on how severe the problem has become and how many other people are affected. Are children involved? Is a marriage failing? Are there legal or career concerns?

Family members and friends need to encourage and support each other—*there is strength in numbers.*

Intervene

What do you do when talking is not working? What's next? Some type of formal or informal intervention should be attempted. By this I mean using a professional interventionist. You might be surprised to find that they are able to pose options you haven't considered. Addiction and recovery is their area of expertise. They have heard every excuse from addicts and know how to respond most effectively. An interventionist can also be extremely persuasive and motivating.

The traditional intervention includes a training session for family members and other participants to equip them in ways to approach the addict. Often, the interventionist will meet the family and go over everything in advance—when to do it, what everyone should do to prepare, and what to say. Sometimes role-playing the entire event first is also effective.

The next step is the actual intervention. All the prep work has been done, the day and time

chosen and the plans finalized for getting the addict to the selected site--including an alternate day and place. Usually someone who knows their daily routine is selected to bring the user to the site. Most often, but not always, the addict does not know the real reason he is being taken there.

Once everyone is together, the interventionist will facilitate the meeting. Each person will speak, or read from a prepared statement, detailing why they love or care for this person, and how the person's abuse has affected their life. This can be a very emotional time; preparation is extremely important. Any potential objections that the addict may have concerning entering treatment will be anticipated. The interventionist's job is to guide the process. He will keep emotions in check and see that the outcome is successful.

A successful intervention is followed by a referral (and an escort, if necessary) to an appropriate treatment facility. The main focus is to get the person into treatment. Most of the time arrangements will have been made in advance so that taking time off work, childcare, and payment for treatment are not issues.

Remain Hopeful

Okay, so you have done all the above and nothing is working.

What now? Do you quit trying? No. You may need to pull back for a while--maybe even for a long while; but remember, you need to remain hopeful that change will eventually happen. I know how difficult this can be. The few short years when we pulled back and waited for our son to take responsibility were very frustrating. It was not always easy to be optimistic. *For our son, pain ended up being the best teacher.* Many men and women will fight with the alcohol/addiction problem until they are mentally and physically depleted.

That is when the recovery process will begin.

Joe Herzanek, a man who battled his own demons of addiction over twenty-five years ago, says, "I know people can change. If I can do it, anyone can!"

A recovering person himself, Joe is the president and founder of Changing Lives Foundation and author of the new book "Why Don't They Just Quit?" As an addiction counselor in Colorado he has spent thirteen years working in the criminal justice system.

His passion for helping men and women struggling with addiction, as well as their family members and friends, inspire him to offer hope and solutions.

Joe offers words of encouragement: "Addiction is not a hopeless situation," he writes. "Addicts and alcoholics aren't crazy, and they can quit."

Joe and his wife Judy have three children, Jami, Jake, and Jessica, and enjoy the beautiful Colorado outdoors with their two Cairn Terriers, Lewis and Clark.

<http://www.whydonttheyjustquit.com>



<http://www.changinglivesfoundation.org>

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