

# WHEN ADDICTION IS CLOSE TO HOME: A Toolkit for Families

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## DOES SOMEONE YOU LOVE HAVE AN ADDICTION?

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At this time you may have someone in your life struggling with alcohol or drug use. This individual may be contemplating getting help, preparing to go into treatment, or has entered a treatment facility. You may be overwhelmed with all kinds of emotions ranging from relief, sadness, as well as anxiety. Such feelings are not uncommon and you are not alone in this process. Many family members of people with addictions (substance-affected families) feel like they have just gotten off of an emotional rollercoaster after dealing with someone else's substance abuse problems. Frequently substance-affected families experience an enormous amount of stress because they have just witnessed people they love self-destructing with alcohol or drugs. Possible reactions to this stress can include worry, anger, fear, resentment, embarrassment, etc. Often family members will find that they are experiencing a state of emotional burn-out whereby they are physically as well as emotionally exhausted from dealing with the turmoil of an addicted person's problems. If you are a substance-affected family member with these circumstances then take a moment to pause because you deserve to take time for yourself as you absorb what has just happened to you. Often we as a society focus on the individuals with the identifiable problems (i.e. people with substance abuse issues) and we forget that there is an entire group of individuals that are also impacted by others' addictions.

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## CREATING A TOOL KIT

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Now that your loved one with substance abuse issues has entered treatment, you will need that extra time to heal from the stress or any feelings of emotional burn-out that you may have

experienced. Not all people are able to admit they have problems with substance abuse so the journey toward finding recovery and/or treatment can be a long road with all kinds of twisting turns. You were likely a passenger alongside someone on this road to recovery and even as a witness to watching someone self-destruct with drugs or alcohol you can experience tremendous stress. Often loved ones of people with addictions will ask themselves what they should do or not do in order to be helpful to individuals in early recovery. The following document is a list of skills or what is commonly referred to as a "tool kit." When individuals go through treatment, they will learn valuable skills or "tools". At the end of treatment, people decide which skills or "tools" are most valuable for their own personal situations. Therefore such individuals are empowered to reach within their own "tool kits" to pull out the skills necessary to deal with particular situations or circumstances. As a loved one of someone with addiction, you also can benefit from a number of skills or tools. Below is a list of tools that families typically find helpful during their journeys of healing from the impact of other people's addictions.

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## TOOL #1: EMOTIONAL SPACE

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Addiction is a complicated disease because individuals may be resistant at times to treatment. People with addictions will develop a favourite substance or drug of choice. In early recovery, individuals may be quite resistant to giving up their drug of choice because this substance has played a very important role in their lives. Furthermore, this substance can be used to enhance or suppress feelings as well as experiences. Therefore individuals with addictions will use their drug of choice as a way of coping or as an emotional crutch. Recovery means that such individuals will now

have to stand on their own two feet, experience feelings they may have never confronted before, and make changes toward a new recovery lifestyle. Such a prospect can be scary to many people because recovery is uncharted territory. Even if people were not happy in their addictions, such an experience was a familiar form of misery. Rather than working through fears, many individuals in early recovery will develop defences or forms of denial instead of embracing change. Some forms of denial include:

- **Minimizing:** claiming that the impact of the drinking or drug-use was not all that bad
- **Rationalizing:** creating excuses for the drinking or drug-use
- **Denying:** not accepting responsibility for the impact of the drinking or drug-use
- **Deflecting/Blaming:** not taking responsibility for personal actions and instead blaming others for behaviours

Your loved one with addictions who is in treatment may need to work through a variety of defences or forms of denial before they come to terms with the fact that they really do have an addiction. This work is particularly important and there may even be times when your loved one tries to convince you that they are not an alcoholic or that their drug-use is not that bad. Loved ones may even ask you to bail them out of treatment. An important way of being supportive is to give your loved one emotional space to work through these levels of defence with their counsellor rather than trying to rescue them from a treatment program by taking them home. Your loved one deserves emotional space in order to work on their issues. Likewise, you need emotional space in order to process your own emotional burn-out and to come to terms with your own healing journey. The addiction has not just impacted your loved one, but it has had an effect on yourself as well.

Individuals will go through all kinds of phases on their way to maintaining recovery. For example, some people will “bargain with their addictions” by trying to prove to themselves that they can set limits with their alcohol intake. For example, Jayeson may say “I know I am not an alcoholic because

I can drink three beer and then stop.” Jayeson is bargaining with his addiction by trying to make deals around a smaller or moderated amount of alcohol intake, while still denying that he is an alcoholic. In fact, Jayeson may even “go out and do more research” about his addiction by trying to prove that he is a reformed alcoholic. Likely Jayeson can set limits a few times, however in the long term Jayeson is an alcoholic and will resort back again to his uncontrollable as well as self-destructive drinking patterns. While your loved one is in treatment, you may hear about how they need to leave treatment because they can now drink smaller amounts of alcohol etc. Such individuals are “bargaining with their addictions” and this is a natural process. The key point is that you allow them their own emotional space and also take time for yourself rather than rescuing them from treatment. There will come a time when you will need to have faith in the fact that the counsellors know what they are doing and with the experience of treating hundreds if not thousands of people with addictions, the staff will support your loved one in recognizing the bargaining, minimizing, rationalizing, etc as defences and not reality.

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## **TOOL #2: SELF-CARE**

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If you have had the experience of dealing with someone else’s addiction then you obviously have been drawn into the role of being an expert manager over another person’s life who is out of control. Individuals with addictions are self-destructing with drugs and/or alcohol. As a result, such people will frequently neglect responsibilities as they focus all of their energies on obtaining drugs of choice. Loved ones are left to deal with these responsibilities as well as manage the chaos or dramas that result from individuals’ self-destructive drinking or drug-using patterns. In fact, loved ones are often invited in to try to manage, fix, control, or change situations. For example, partners and family members of people with addictions will often pay off drug debts or resolve other issues. Loved ones will fix situations that are out of control before there are even worse consequences for all that are involved. The problem is that substance-

affected partners or families continue to do all this fixing as well as managing while individuals with addictions keep creating even more drama/chaos related to their drug-using or drinking behaviours. Often loved ones feel stressed as well as depleted of joy and their overall quality of life begins to suffer. Substance-affected partners and family members often feel consumed by the problems of others with addictions.

Even once individuals with addictions enter treatment facilities, substance-affected partners and families may still continue on with old patterns of monitoring, fixing, changing, controlling, or managing others who are now in recovery. The focus is always on the person with the problem (addiction) and how he or she is doing. Loved ones learn to focus their attention outward on to the individuals with addictions while frequently forgetting about their own wellbeing. Over time, the totality of loved ones' happiness can rest upon whether other individuals used drugs that day or not. Such loved ones have forgotten about their own self-care at the expense of always trying to manage the other person with the addiction who has a life spinning out of control. Therefore in order to regain personal health as well as happiness, substance-affected partners and families need to start to re-focus their energies on to increasing their quality of lives. In essence, loved ones must start taking better care of themselves instead of always depleting their own energy levels in constant worry about other individuals in early recovery.

Furthermore, individuals with addictions need to learn to stand on their own two feet rather than having family members carry them through all of their problems. If loved ones continue to rescue, manage, or caretake then individuals in recovery remain weak and never learn to become self-sufficient. Loved ones may become accustomed to caring for others with addictions and part of the journey to healing for themselves is to allow others to have the power to work through issues.

If you are a loved one of someone with addiction, you can benefit yourself and others better if you begin to engage in self-care. When you direct all of the energy from managing other people's lives back on to caring for yourself then you are giving others

their own adulthood back. You no longer have to act as the over-functioning parent who cares for a child. In fact, you do not have to do for others what they can do for themselves. If you are always doing for others, then those people remain lazy as well as weak. In order to empower others and reclaim your own happiness then you will need to focus on self-care (caring for yourself).

There are many ways to practice self-care. For example you may exercise, participate in your favourite activity, eat delicious food, attend a funny movie, pamper your body, etc. This may seem strange that in the midst of your loved one's addiction and crisis in life that you are going to self-indulge by caring for yourself. The main point is that you will need to develop a sense of healthy emotional detachment so that you can allow others the emotional space that they need to work on their recovery program while also healing from your emotional burn-out. You are not doing people favours when you are managing their lives for them. Instead, you will need to re-energize yourself so that you have the ability to enjoy your own life once again.

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### **TOOL # 3: MANAGE THE WORRY MONSTER**

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There is an inevitable intensity in being in a relationship with someone else who has an addiction. People with addictions can create a lot of drama as well as chaos as they self-destruct with mood-altering substances. Substance-affected partners as well as family members may find themselves living in a constant state of panic or worry. For example, if the phone rings loved ones may feel tense wondering if this is the call that they will get to find out that the person that they love with the addiction is now dead or in jail. When a siren screeches down the street, substance-affected families may feel their stomachs drop in panic as they worry that the ambulance is on the way to pick up their addicted loved one from a critical car crash, overdose, or other crisis related to the addiction.

Such worries do not even end once individuals with addictions enter treatment. For example, substance-affected partners may wonder "what if.." What if he leaves treatment? What if he relapses?

What if he doesn't follow the program? What if I begin to trust him and then he relapses again? There is a never-ending series of what if questions. The main point is that worrying is like a bottomless pit with no end in sight. Loved ones of people with addictions will need to learn to manage their own "worry monsters" for the sake of their own sanity as well as personal happiness. Recovery is fluid and not stagnant. This means that individuals with addictions may feel that maintaining sobriety is so hard that they are holding on to the edge of their seats waiting to get through their cravings. Then there are other times that maintaining a recovery program feels effortless. With surprise, some individuals with addictions may wonder how they can manage to go weeks on end without feeling even the smallest craving. If partners and family members keep worrying rather than flowing with certain events, then they will feel like they are riding an emotional rollercoaster. If individuals do not want to feel exhausted, then they will need to start managing their patterns of anxiety. Also such panic energy from family members can be a distraction to individuals in recovery. Sometimes clients will feel the anxiety of loved ones and then begin to second guess their own abilities in recovery because their family members appear to be uneasy.

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#### **TOOL # 4: BOUNDARIES**

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As human beings, we have the right to be treated with respect as well as dignity. When individuals have addictions, they are preoccupied with their drugs of choice. As a result, addicted people will often become very selfish as they focus on themselves while disregarding everyone else's needs. Furthermore, individuals with addictions will often treat their partners or family members as a nuisance who is distracting them away from time that could be better spent using more drugs or alcohol. Therefore people in active addiction are not always the nicest individuals to spend time with or to be around. As well, such individuals will have negative consequences as a result of their use of mood-altering substances. These people may start to have arguments with family members, miss time from work, suffer from health difficulties, encounter legal problems, etc. Addicted individuals need to

experience these problems in order to recognize that they really do have addictions. The problem is that substance-affected partners as well as family members will often try to make things better by giving addicted individuals money or help of some kind. Sometimes it is just easier to give people with addictions money than to listen to the screaming or arguing that may ensue. For example, addicted individuals may break objects, blame others for their problems, have temper tantrums etc. when they do not get their own way.

One of the most important tools or skills is the ability to set boundaries. Substance-affected partners and family members do not have to be held hostage by others who threaten temper tantrums etc. when they do not get money for their drugs or alcohol. Instead, of giving in or enabling (helping the problem to become even worse) loved ones can set boundaries. A boundary is a firm stance along with an expectation. For example, substance-affected family members may say "It is not okay for you to yell at us and use drugs in this house. You will no longer be permitted to live here if you continue on with this behaviour." If the addicted individual does not accept this condition, then they will have to leave.

Substance-affected partners and family members should not have to compromise their values by giving away money to support other people's drug habits or live in fear of others' reactions if they do not provide such financial support. Even if individuals agree to enter treatment, partners and family members may still need to set boundaries by not tolerating disrespectful behaviour that was acceptable during the addiction.

One of the biggest reasons substance-affected partners and family members have problems setting boundaries is because of fear. Many individuals fear that if they do not allow addicted individuals to live with them, then these people will be out on the street or get into even more trouble. The reality is that people with addictions have negative consequences occurring that relate to their decisions to continue to use drugs and/or alcohol. If family members keep saving them from such consequences by bailing them out of trouble or by tolerating abusive behaviour then these individuals with addictions will never feel the need to change. People

in active addiction may rationalize that others will always comfort their falls so why would they strive to change? Often individuals need to feel the pain of their decisions in order to be inspired to change toward a positive direction.

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### **TOOL # 5: PROGRESS NOT PERFECTION**

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Whether individuals are setting boundaries, learning self-care, or healing their own emotional burn-out they need to remember that they have their own journeys to healing. People do not wake up one day being completely healed from years of destructive patterns. Instead, there is a natural process that occurs and individuals benefit when they begin to enjoy the journey along the way. When substance-affected partners and families start to implement these tools, the initial phases may feel awkward. The development of any new skill can feel a bit strange or even clumsy. Therefore it is important that people are patient with themselves. All of us as human beings are a work in progress

and no one truly achieves perfection. So be patient as well as kind with yourself as you begin your own healing journey from the impact of someone else's addiction. This is an opportunity for you to learn and grow as you become a better, stronger person as a result of this process.

#### **Recommended Readings:**

*Addict in the Family: Stories Of Loss, Hope, And Recovery* By Beverly Conyers, c2003 by Hazelden Foundation  
ISBN 1-56838-999-X

*Rebuilding Relationships in Recovery: A Guide To Healing Relationships Impacted By Addiction* By Catherine Patterson-Sterling, c2004 by Catherine Patterson-Sterling Xlibris press  
ISBN 1-4143-5048-2

\*Both books are available on [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com)



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