

Living with an Addict

By Elizabeth Malamed, MFT

Living with an addict can be stressful and painful. There are ways to protect yourself, and in the process become a healthier, happier person

- Remember, it's not about you. Research shows there are physical causes of addiction and biological changes that occur when one is addicted. At a certain point, using drugs ceases to be about choice. An addict must keep using just to function. Addiction is not a moral failure, nor is it something you've caused. It's an illness that can be treated.
- Learn about the drug(s) being used. Each drug is different, be it alcohol, cocaine, methamphetamines, or others. Learn how it affects the body and the mind, and also what the symptoms are. Check the Internet for more information. Some sites to check are: www.nida.gov, www.jointogether.org and www.hazelden.org
- Find support for yourself. It's not only the addict who needs help. You'll benefit from having people in your life who can support you. Find a therapist who works with addicts or people who care for them. Consider attending meetings at Co-Dependents Anonymous (CODA), Adult Children of Alcoholics (ACOA) or Alanon, which is for friends and families of alcoholics. Parents of alcoholics and addicts can check out Tough Love meetings. Schedules of meetings are posted on the Internet. Find people who have experienced what you are going through. Not everyone is able to understand, but those who do can be a source of strength and support.
- Learn about co-dependency. Addicts manipulate the people around them to maintain their addiction. Although you are trying to help, you may be enabling them to keep using. Learn about new ways of behaving that can be more helpful for you and the addict.
- Be aware there are no easy solutions. Sometimes, an addict's behavior will get worse when you begin to change your behavior to deal with him. This is termed "change-back behavior," because it's an attempt by the addict to get you to revert to the old way of doing things. If that happens, it's important to keep going. Don't allow the addict to control the changes you need to make in your life.
- Look at yourself. Family members of addicts are more likely to engage in similar behavior like drug addiction, overeating, or compulsive gambling. Take stock of yourself and your life, and get help if you need it.
- Think about intervention. An intervention is an event, most times led by a professional, where a group of people, usually family and friends, come together to lovingly confront the addict. This act can be particularly helpful if the addict does not realize or

remember what he has done. The end of an intervention involves a choice by the addict: Get help or face the consequences. Often, getting help means checking into a treatment program. Some consequences of not getting help include limiting contact with the addict or refusing to give the addict money.

- Find ways to keep yourself safe and independent. If your spouse drinks too much at parties, bring cab fare, your own car keys, or plan to get a ride home. If money is an issue, separate your finances, or save some money for yourself. Find ways to do for yourself what the addict is supposed to do for you, but cannot. You'll minimize the damage to your life.
- Get your own life. You may feel like you're the only person who can keep an addict from hurting himself, and that you have to focus your attention on the addict. But it doesn't help you or the addict to do so. Independent activities, going to a movie, making new friends, or taking a class can get you out of the house. Build a life for yourself away from the addict. You'll think more clearly and won't feel so obsessed. Over time, you'll be able to enjoy your life again whether the addict gets better or not.
- Consider leaving. It can be a lot easier to cope with an addict in your life when you aren't living under the same roof. If that isn't possible, make a safe place for yourself and spend some time alone. It may mean staying up later or getting up earlier, locking your door, or wearing earplugs. Be creative in finding ways to make time for yourself.
- Know that you can lead a happy and healthy life. You have the power to make changes in your life for the better, and there are people willing to help. You can do it.

About the Author

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