

10 Ways

1. Learn the facts about alcoholism and addiction.

Obtain information through counseling, open AA/NA meetings and Al-Anon.

Addiction thrives in an environment of ignorance and denial. Only when we understand the characteristics and dynamics of addiction can we begin to respond to its symptoms more effectively. Realizing that addiction is a progressive disease will assist family members in accepting their loved one as a “sick person” rather than a “bad person.” This comprehension goes a long way toward helping overcome the associated shame and guilt. No one is to blame, the problem is not caused by bad parenting or any other family shortcoming. Attendance at open AA/NA meetings is important. Families need to see they are not alone in their experience, and there are many other families just like theirs involved in this struggle. Families will find a reason to be hopeful when they hear the riveting stories of recovery shared at these meetings.

2. Don't rescue the person with an addiction. Let him/her experience the full consequence of his/her disease. Unfortunately, it is extremely rare for anyone to be “loved” into recovery.

Addicted people experience a “hitting bottom.” This implies an accumulation of negative consequences related to alcohol or drug use which provides the necessary motivation and inspiration to initiate a recovery effort. It has been said that “truth” and “consequences” are the foundations of insight and this holds true for addiction. Rescuing the addicted person from his/her consequences only ensures that more consequences must occur before the need for recovery is realized.

3. Don't financially support the addicted person or their addiction.

Money is the lifeblood of addiction. Financial support can be provided in many ways and they all serve to prolong the arrival of consequences. Buying groceries, paying for a car repair bill, loaning money, paying rent, paying a court fine, etc. - are all examples of contributing to the continuation of alcohol or drug use. Money is almost always given by family members with the best of intentions, but it always serves to enable the person with an addiction to avoid the natural and necessary consequences of addiction. Many persons who are addicted take steps toward recovery simply because they could not get money to buy their drug. Consequently, they experience withdrawal symptoms and often seek help.

4. Don't analyze the loved one's alcohol or drug use.

Don't try to figure it out or look for underlying causes.

There are no underlying causes. Addiction is a disease. Looking for underlying causes is a waste of time and energy and usually ends up with some type of blame focused on the family or others. This “paralysis by analysis” is a common manipulation by the disease of addiction which distracts everyone from the important issue of the disease itself.

5. Don't make idle threats. Say what you mean and mean what you say!

Words only marginally impact persons addicted to alcohol and drugs. Rather, “actions speak louder than words” applies to addiction. Threats are as meaningless as the promises made by the addicted person.

6. Don't extract promises. A person with an addiction cannot keep promises.

This is not because they don't intend to, but rather because they are powerless to consistently act upon their commitments. Extracting a promise is a waste of time and only serves to increase the anger toward the loved one.

7. Don't preach or lecture. Preaching and lecturing are easily discounted by the addicted person.

A sick person is not motivated to take positive action through guilt or intimidation. If an alcoholic or addict could be “talked into” getting sober, many more people would get sober.

8. Avoid the reactions of pity and anger. These emotions create a painful roller coaster for the loved one.

For any given amount of anger that is felt by a family member in any given situation, that amount or more, of pity will be felt for the one with an addiction once the anger subsides. This “teeter-totter” is a common experience. Family members get angry over a situation, make threats or initiate consequences, and then backtrack from those decisions once the anger has subsided and then replaced by pity. If anger can be avoided then so can pity. The family can then follow through on their decision to not enable.

9. Don't accommodate the disease.

Addiction is a subtle foe. It will infiltrate a family's home, lifestyle and attitudes in a way that can go unnoticed by the family. As the disease progresses within the family system, the family will unknowingly accommodate its presence. Examples of accommodation include locking up money and other valuables; not inviting guests over for fear that their addicted loved one might embarrass them; adjusting one's work schedule to be home more; and planning one's day around events involving the addicted loved one.

10. Focus upon your own life and responsibilities.

Family members must identify areas of their lives that have been neglected due to their focus or obsession with the addicted loved one. Other family members, hobbies, job and health, for example, often take a back seat to meet the needs of the loved one and their inevitable crisis of addiction. Focusing on the personal areas of one's life is empowering and helpful to all concerned.

The Role of the Family

The pain and suffering of addiction is not limited to the person abusing alcohol or drugs. Family members share a tremendous burden as well. Shame, guilt, fear, worry, anger and frustration are common, everyday feelings for family members concerned about a loved one's alcohol or drug use. In most cases, the family has endured the brunt of the consequences for the loved one's addiction, including the stress of worry, financial costs, and life adjustments made to accommodate the addicted person's lifestyle. Addiction leads them away from the positive influences of the family. The disease twists the family's love, concern and a willingness to be helpful into a host of enabling behaviors that only help to perpetuate the disease of addiction.

Family and friends are usually very busy attempting to help the addicted person, but the help is the wrong kind. If directed toward effective strategies and interventions, however, loved ones become a powerful influence in helping the loved one “hit bottom” and seek professional help. At the very least, families can detach themselves from the painful consequences of their loved one's disease and cease their enabling behavior.





For more information

How to Use 10 Ways

Each of these suggestions should be approached separately as individual goals. It is difficult to make an abrupt change or adjustment from the behaviors that formed while the disease of addiction progressed. One cannot over emphasize the need for support of family members as they attempt to make changes.

Counseling agencies must provide family education and programs to share this information. They must offer opportunities for families to change their attitudes and behaviors. The most powerful influence in helping families make these changes is Al-Anon. By facing their fears and weathering the emotional storms that will follow, they can then commit to ending their enabling entanglements.

The disease of addiction will fervently resist a family's effort to say "no" and stop enabling. Every possible emotional manipulation will be exhibited in an effort to get the family to resume "business as usual." There will always be certain family members or friends who will resist the notion of not enabling, join forces with the sick person and accuse the family of lacking love. The resistance is a difficult but necessary hurdle for the family to overcome. Yet, it is necessary if they are to be truly helpful, the weight of the natural consequences of the addiction must be experienced by the addict rather than the family, or there can be no reason for hope of recovery.

In the beginning, family members are extremely focused on helping their sick loved one and have very little interest in helping themselves. Therefore a strategy of ending enabling behaviors and withdrawing inappropriate support that is designed to help their loved one become more willing to seek help, will be more readily accepted by the family and will provide them with the incentive to take these difficult actions.



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10 Ways Family Members Can Help

