

'Do You Mean Me?'



A Self Help Guide For Carers Affected By Substance Misuse



South Tyne

I have written this self help guide targeted towards people who are caring for a loved one who is using a substance that affects their life, your life or both. This could be a friend family member brother or sister; it does not have to be your child or partner. If you are reading this you are a Carer.

The stigma behind drugs and alcohol can prevent us both accepting and acknowledging our loved ones drug or alcohol use and this can also lead to us questioning yourself, 'Am I a REAL carer?' 'I thought a carer was someone who looked after people with long term illness or physical disabilities'. You may find yourself believing and thinking 'It's my job', 'I am his mother therefore my responsibility' or 'He's my husband. I married him, for better or worse'. You may find yourself thinking how can I be a carer I don't live with him/her. You may even feel that you don't really do anything as you live with the effects of drug and alcohol use on a daily basis and maybe you always have so therefore it's the 'norm'.

Most carers don't call themselves carers anyway. Over the years I have lost count of the number of clients who have looked amazed when I have pointed out to them that they are carers' the look of amazement; then a sense of acknowledgement followed by relief washes over them. Living with or 'caring' for someone who uses substances can be like permanently riding a rollercoaster. They may stop using then relapse, where does that leave you? So this guide is to help you see yourself as a carer by exploring ways to help your loved one and identifying your own needs. Where are you in all of this? It isn't about fixing or saving someone. Its aims are about how their use affects you and how you may be able to deal with the various difficult feelings and circumstances you may find yourself in.

ARE THESE FEELINGS 'NORMAL'

You may feel several different emotions at different stages. Carers in general are ordinary people - of course you're going to feel tired, frustrated and generally worn out. The responsibility of your day to day life may sometimes feel like a burden. Why me? You may feel angry at what they are doing; how it is affecting their lives, how it is affecting yours. You may at times feel angry at yourself and then in turn feel guilty about those feelings of anger. You may feel sad about your lost plans and dreams. Feel despondent about the future; for both them and you. When will this end? You may feel it's your fault - self blame. If only I'd been more patient, could I have done it differently? You may feel embarrassment, embarrassed by the way they look, act or behave. You may sometimes feel isolated. This could be within your circle of friends or your community and even your family. You may sometimes feel you can't go on and then the factor of who will do it kicks in. You may also hold the fear that if things do change where will that leave me as it's all you've known for so many years. This is sometimes known as co-dependency as their drug/alcohol use is taking over your own life.

There are so many different emotions and feelings many I will have not have mentioned. One of the biggest parts of the emotional cycle I haven't yet mentioned is - LOVE. You love this person you care for and usually unconditionally. The person you may be caring for could be your 32 year old son but he's still YOUR son, I have worked with a mum whose 60 year old daughter was using alcohol problematically. He may be your husband but you are committed to your marriage for better or worse - friends/family may say just leave him!! She may be your hormonal 14 year old daughter/granddaughter - you can't 'kick' her out!! Carers don't and can't turn their back because they are carers they care.

You remember the day when things were 'easier'. When your little boy, was your little boy. When your husband was Mr. Nice etc. Sometimes it's hard to remember those times. Being a carer the words LOVE and BUT are often closely linked. How did this happen, how did I become a carer? Explore this and acknowledge it; this is part of your cycle and maybe one of the most difficult cycles that sticks in your mind forever.

DENIAL/EMOTIONS

Disbelief and anger – ‘this cant be happening, my child wouldn’t do this.’ ‘My partner has always liked a drink, but he can handle it.’ ‘It’s only a couple of joints’ or ‘one two many pints.’ There’s a logical reason/concern, what is it? What have I missed? You may have minimised their use in the past. Maybe their use has increased and started to become problematic in your eyes, the user could still be happy at this stage. Everyone goes through this stage. You may find yourself saying ‘it’s just a phase’ or ‘they are having a hard time and they will come out of it.’ It is important to add here that some people do. This may be in the early stages of substance use when a family member actually finds out for sure there are a range of thoughts you may go through. The user could still be happy at this stage and does not see it as problematic. You may blame other people; ‘they got into a bad crowd’ ‘She winds me up’. You may start to experience feelings of panic - ‘I won’t be able to cope’. You may feel angry, frustrated and scared.

CONTROL/CHAOS

You may feel a compelling urge to control the situation. You could be starting to recognise that there is a problem while the user may not. He may still have some ambivalence still be in denial and this may bring about conflicting feelings. I must stop this. You may be determined to take control and a need to protect can take over. As you and your loved one can be at different stages this can often be a time of crisis for you.

To fix it you want them in rehab, or a detox, you may want to send them away or take them out of the situation. You may again be blaming others or the area you live in. You may control their finances; keep their bank cards or deny them money. You may make up a lie for them so they don't lose their jobs or do their work for them and hide the extent the situation has come to and cover up for them. You may plead and beg them. If they don't do what you say you may create punishments or you may falter between giving in and tolerating and enabling and colluding with them. None of these actions usually help but most people will go through this stage several times. This can be seen and described as a game of emotional blackmail. Who can blame you? You feel desperate and will do anything to break this cycle? In theory you will probably return to this part of the cycle many times.

It may be helpful at this stage to make a conscious effort to hear them, listen to them and try and motivate them. Be consistent, don't give up and encourage them to take some responsibility if they want help. Seek help and support for yourself perhaps take some advice from professionals otherwise this stage can become a game of emotional black mail.

The person using substances asks or demands money - you refuse so they threaten. All they may see is their own need. They may crave alcohol or drugs either physically or psychologically - they can only see their own need. If you don't give them what they want you are told it's your fault they had to steal from you. They could go into withdrawal which is dangerous. You made them feel so low they had to drink. Or you can't stand to see them in pain. You are worried they may fit so you give in. You can never win this game. The threats can become worse, emotional violence, physical violence, even stealing and threats of self harm. No one understands this commonly used phrase and there are no right or wrong ways of dealing with these situations and you can't change your personality or the love for that person. There is only you can decide on your actions taking into account your own personal level of risk to either you or your loved one. Again there is no right or wrong way to deal with feelings or situations. You do have choices if your loved one isn't prepared to change it is sometimes about you changing to be able to cope.

COPING/DILEMMAS

You may have got to the stage where you now feel “I have had enough”. It’s their problem, not mine. I cope better and have help on hand for myself. They have choices and there is help for them also. All you can do is your best as a parent, partner or carer.

Your loved one may be at any stage at this point they could still be using or they may have reduced or be abstinent. Maybe you have changed together. You may be feeling sadness, acceptance, hope concern, understanding even humour. They are all very conflicting words. It may not be helpful at this stage to test them like trying to catch them out. You need to recognise that it takes time to rebuild trust. Try to be future focused not dwelling on the past, however, try not to believe all your troubles are over or expect too much. It may be helpful to recognise that there is a difference between their issues and yours. Look after yourself. You need to continue to revisit and set appropriate boundaries and the consequences of them being broken. What worked today may not work tomorrow but **STICK TO THEM!!**

Acknowledge that your situation is difficult and complex. How do you not go and get someone a bottle to prevent withdrawal or violence. Only you can judge their level of maintenance. How do you not give your child money when you know they could end up in hospital as they owe their dealer? Common advices from friends etc don’t give in, throw them out. Ask yourself could they live with the constant anxiety? Life isn’t black and white. Effective boundaries are the foundation of all relationships but particularly important with substance users. In reality boundaries need re-setting many times it doesn’t mean you have failed.

SO WHATS NEXT? WHATS RIGHT? WHATS WRONG?

The only person who can decide that is YOU! What's right for you may not be right for another carer. As far as you can you have to choose how your loved one fits into your life not you into their substance use. If you allow this to happen the co-dependency will go on.

One day your loved one may decide to stop using or they may not, that however has to be their choice. You can't control that so try to concentrate on what you can control. Can you accept that drugs or alcohol will be a part of their life? YOU are the only person that can decide if their use will dominate your life also. In the same way it's up to them to decide if they want to stop using. If you can, where do you want that to fit into your life. Can you maintain that boundary and not allow their use to take over your life? Sticking to these boundaries may be harder than you thought at the time but you don't have to do it on your own. Do you have other family members or friends you can call to help? This would be an ideal time to gain extra support from a specialised agency if you haven't already; someone who isn't emotionally involved.

Take each day at a time, what was right yesterday may not be right tomorrow? Take one step at a time. Is it time to reclaim your life? How much has been 'stolen' from your life? Not just things that have gone missing or the money you have paid out but your social life, sleep, friends, relaxation, FUN!! When was the last time you had some 'me' time? Take small steps at a time, possibly revisiting your boundaries now you can start rebuilding parts of your life. Being future focused but it's important not to feel despondent if things slip backwards. It happens don't give up on yourself but accept that some things may be lost forever.

Living with this often for many years may mean you have changed drastically yourself. You may find that you are less judgemental of others and that some of your friends who were judgemental are no longer around. At times you will feel like you have been to hell and back and you probably have but it's important to remember you have survived it. By accepting and accessing support you are on a road to help yourself and possibly helping your loved one to get back on track. If they see that you are dealing with your part in this they may take responsibility for dealing with their part as well. So well done you are on the road to recovery.

Local Relevant Services

NECA South Tyneside Family Support – offering support, advice, guidance, counselling, one to one sessions and group work.

01914 569 999

Helpline – 07789986089 (business hours only)

Carers Association

01914 543 346

CASA (Carers affected by Substance Abuse)

01914 106 272

Escape

01914 788 880

SAPS (South Area Parent Support)

0191 520 344 44

National Relevant Services

CARERS UK

08088 087 777

AA (Alcoholics Anonymous)

08457 697 555

ADFAM

02075 537 640

FRANK (Free 24 hour helpline)

08007 76600

Child Line (Free 24 hour helpline)

0800 1111

Drug Concern (Available 9am – 5pm answer phone service out of hours)

08451 203 745

PADA (Parents Against Drug Abuse)

08457 023 867

Relate

08451 304 010

Samaritans

08457 909 090

Women's Aid

08457 023 468

Bibliography

ADFAM

Freedom Project

FDS (Family Drug Support)