

Caring for Someone with Alcohol and Other Drugs Dependence

Caring for someone who is dependent on alcohol and/or drugs is usually a long and difficult process. In the early stages of drug use which is often referred to as 'happy user' stage, carer and family are often in their own stage of denial: they either don't see the warning signs because they don't want to face the impact of the problem or don't know the drug use is happening. Eventually families and carers gradually come to terms with the problem of alcohol or drug use either by a series of events or by a major incident such as a crime, an arrest or an overdose.

Some of the initial feeling you may have as a relative or carer of someone with alcohol or drug dependence may include:

- Guilt
- Fear
- Grief and
- Anger

Many families and carers, when they realise they have a major problem, usually want to control things by both setting an ultimatum, and strict boundaries or showing sympathy and over-accommodating the family member's behaviour. Unfortunately, none of these work by itself once the drug taking is entrenched. Family often finds themselves in chaos – feeling powerless and unable to cope effectively. This places stress on the family systems, and some families collapse under the strain; others disconnect from the drug user.

Family's strain and disconnection could be compounded by the community attitudes towards the person who is dependent on drugs and alcohol and their family members.

The culture of shame and stigma further intensify family and carers' feeling of isolation and loneliness. Shame and stigma often make the person who is dependent on alcohol and/or drugs exclude their family members and carers from helpful therapeutic intervention. They often felt, it was their fault and problem that they had to fix for themselves.

All is not lost, family drug and mental health services are now offering support, information and tips on coping to families and carers of people with alcohol and other drugs dependence. Treatment services offer a way through dependence, and by working together families can negotiate the long, hard journey. No one is more expert on a drug user than their family.

While the goal for most families and carers is to get their loved one off drugs, it is important to accept and acknowledge that this is usually a slow, incremental process where many positive steps can be achieved along the road. This can include:

- Improved communication among family members, including the drug user
- Building skills and resilience that assist families to cope with the various issues
- Establishing more effective boundaries in place
- Carer being able to get on with their own lives –interests, hobbies and relationships
- Putting harm minimisation strategies in place

You can find helpful support and resources for carers of people with alcohol and other drugs dependence at the back of this booklet.

Scan the QR code for soft copy of this brochure and other Mental Health and Alcohol & Other Drugs carer resources.



Southern NSW
Local Health District

