When someone close has an addiction

When someone we care about has a problem with alcohol or other drugs, a myth persists that it must be kept a secret. We may try to deny or forget our feelings and get on with our lives, but the 'secret' has a way of festering and feelings of embarrassment, fear and anger don't remain buried forever. One client commented, 'I got so used to covering up for my husband's drinking that I didn't even think of it as a drinking problem; more like a whole bunch of other problems I just had to deal with. I couldn't sleep, wondering when he would come home. I was snapping at the kids. It just seemed like everything was falling apart.'

Even when we recognize the problem as addiction, we may be operating under some other myths that make our anguish worse. One is: 'if she really loved me she'd quit'. Another : 'if only I were a better (parent, partner, son, daughter, etc.) he would straighten out'.

As our lives become more and more focused on the addicted individual, a way of thinking and behaving called 'co-dependency' can set in. We may become preoccupied with controlling everything in their lives; for example, paying their bills, bailing them out of trouble - taking on virtually all of their responsibilities under the misguided assumption that these duties are our own. 'We walk on eggshells, plead, lecture and threaten; hoping the addicted person will change. But all they see is someone who is judgmental and critical,' says Micki Meehan, who counsels the family members of people with addictions at the Donwood Institute in Toronto.

The price of Co-Dependency can be high

In getting so caught up in the thoughts and actions of another, our own values and needs can go by the wayside. Relationships become manipulative or abusive. Social life, personal interests and health are neglected. Meehan has seen many stress-related ailments in people whose lives revolve around someone with an addiction. 'These range from headaches, overeating and stomach problems to abusing alcohol or other drugs themselves.'

In the home, our efforts at 'damage control' may actually discourage the addicted person from acknowledging the addiction and seeking help. Observes Meehan, 'if I am covering up or repairing the evidence of your drunkenness, where's the proof that your drunkenness is a problem?'
'When taking on other people's responsibilities becomes the focus of one's personal life, it is not unusual to carry some form of controlling behaviour into the workplace' observes ACCESS counsellor Elizabeth Jong. Therefore, at work, we may have difficulty delegating to others or we may feel that no one can do a job as well as we can. We also may tend to isolate ourselves from group projects, social discussions or situations that may bring attention to what is happening at home. What about the children?

Children growing up in homes with addiction and co-dependency may have a difficult time because their needs are often neglected in order to accommodate the habits of the addicted family members. Some teenagers may leave home to escape the worry, arguments and sometimes, physical abuse - then sadly, fall into situations in which they may be vulnerable, misguided or without a sense of direction and purpose. Other children 'escape' in socially acceptable ways. They throw themselves into schoolwork or athletics and perhaps later, into their careers, only to become quite driven by these concerns and unable to enjoy life. Still others become what noted psychologist John Bradshaw calls the 'family hero'; devoting the better part of their young lives assuming inappropriate adult roles in order to care for the family. 'In many cases, children can grow up with very confused ideas about love, self respect and responsibility. This confusion often expresses itself in unhappy adult relationships,' says Elizabeth Jong.

Recognition is a first step

Are you affected by someone's addiction? Here is a checklist adapted from Al-Anon Family Groups to help your decide: (Al-Anon is a worldwide self-help group which offers support to family members).

- Do you worry about how much someone drinks or that they are using drugs for non-medicinal purposes?
- Are you frequently embarrassed or hurt by that person?

- Do you have money problems because of someone's drinking or drug-taking?
- Are mealtimes frequently delayed to accommodate the person?
- Are you embarrassed or afraid to invite people to your home?
- Do you tell lies to cover up for someone's drinking or drug-taking?
- Do you stay away from home as much as possible because you hate it there? On the other hand, do you refuse social invitations because you are afraid to leave the home?
- Do you ever threaten to leave or hurt yourself in order to scare the person into quitting?
- Do you think the person's drinking or drug-taking is caused by you, other members of your family; friends or rotten breaks in life?
- Do you often treat people unjustly because you are angry at the person?
- Do you often cover up your real feelings with false cheerfulness or by pretending you don't care?
- Do you feel that nobody really cares about you or respects you?
- Are you doing things for people they should be doing for themselves out of concern they will leave you or that they won't love or respect you?
- Do you find it hard to care for yourself?
- Do you have a need for perfection; expecting others to behave in ways that make you feel good?
- Do you isolate from people or reject them when they don't do what you want?
- Even when life is going fairly smoothly, are you continuously anticipating problems?
- Do you attract and seek "stormy" relationships or situations?
- Do you distrust most people, thinking they are taking advantage of you or planning to?

Moving toward solutions

If you think you are affected by someone else's addiction, it's important to realize that you didn't cause it; nor did anyone else. We are only responsible for our own behaviour, and recovery from addiction is only possible when people choose recovery for themselves. For this to happen (and for your life to improve), it is necessary to focus on your own thoughts, feelings and actions instead of others.

How to begin? Start by writing yourself a letter, suggests Meehan. 'This may help identify thoughts and feelings you didn't realize you had.' You may also want to reflect on how you acted upon those thoughts or feelings (putting aside how others behaved, for the moment). When we can see, without blaming ourselves or others, how our own behaviour affects a situation, we gain confidence. At that point it is easier to stop controlling others and to stop them from controlling us.

Begin to surround yourself with positive support. Read some uplifting books, (there are many in libraries and bookstores that touch on addiction and co-dependency). Try discussing the situation with someone in a similar situation; for example, in a support group. You may find it useful to talk to a professional counsellor to determine the best way to deal with your particular situation. Remember that you can't change things for the better by keeping an addiction a 'secret' or by believing myths. The truth sometimes hurts but ultimately it does heal.

How counselling can help?

1. Counselling provides the caring insight and objectivity that helps you look at the situation in its entirety so you can understand yourself and others.
2. Counselling offers safe, professional means of helping you explore difficult feelings and find productive ways to act upon them.
3. A counsellor works with you, step-by-step, as your situation unfolds. If you find yourself in a particularly difficult spot, your counsellor will help you through it.
4. Counselling empowers you to connect with the courage to make necessary yet sometimes difficult choices. When this happens, others will see you making positive changes and may then feel the need to make some of their own.