Dealing with the addiction of a loved one

Dealing with a loved one who has an addiction, whether it is an alcohol, drug, gambling, or some other form of problem, can be quite challenging. Helping someone, especially a loved one, calls for patience, understanding, strength, and being realistic.



Patience. Addiction problems do not just happen overnight, nor do they disappear overnight. An addicted person may go through many stages of dependency, relapse, and recovery. This means that it may take some time before an addicted person finally resolves the problem. For those close to the addicted person, it is important not to expect that behaviour change will occur immediately.

Understanding. People use alcohol or drugs, or engage in other addictive behaviours, to self-medicate and gain relief from either emotional or physical discomfort. Acknowledging to the addicted individual that you understand he/she is going through a difficult time, or that the alcohol or drugs he/she is using are in some ways helping the individual, can be very significant in effectively dealing with the person. This is not to say that you support their use of alcohol or drugs, but it shows you recognize that your loved one must really be going through a difficult time in order to turn to alcohol or drugs for escape.

For people who use alcohol or drugs for reasons not associated with relief or discomfort, but possibly for social reasons or to enhance pleasure, demonstrating an understanding of their situation and reasons for use can still be beneficial in the long-term. It is important, however, that you express your genuine concern about your loved one's health and welfare. It is essential that you help your loved one see that there are alternatives to using alcohol and drugs. Make clear to your loved one that they are not alone in dealing with the problem and that you will provide as much support as possible.

Strength. Strength is an important characteristic when dealing with a loved one's addiction. You must be strong enough to know when to intervene and when to back off. You must realize that you are not responsible for the individual's successes or difficulties in resolving the addiction problem. It is important to be conscious of playing the "enabler" role in which you indirectly support the loved one's addiction by making excuses or taking on responsibilities that are not yours. You can be influential, but the decision to change or not to change is ultimately made left up to the one with the problem.

Realistic. Being realistic means that you acknowledge and accept the many facets of recovery from addictions that your loved one may experience during their recovery process. Being realistic includes understanding that:

- Recovery takes time
- Relapses may occur
- Changes in behaviour will affect you and your loved one—individually, as a couple and as a family
- There will be emotional ups-and-downs; good days and bad days
- New behaviours and ways of coping with situations will need to be learned by everyone involved

Keep in mind, however, that even though it may mean a lot of work has to be accomplished to achieve a new way of living, the short-term challenges will definitely give way to long-term benefits.

Be patient, be strong, be realistic… and if you need some support for yourself along the way, feel free to contact a professional for confidential, professional counselling.