



A Better Way to a Better Life

Supporting Recovery: The Role of the Family

Resources and Additional Support

How can you help a relative who has co-occurring psychiatric and substance use disorders?

Family members can play a key role on the road to recovery.

You can start by learning more about mental health disorders, addiction, and "integrated treatment"—treatment that addresses these disorders together.

You'll see how psychiatric disorders and addiction interact in a person's life, and you'll understand your loved one better. You can help your loved one learn to manage both disorders and get on with life.

These are the strategies to keep in mind ...

- help your relative follow all treatment recommendations
- encourage total abstinence from alcohol and drugs
- help your relative build good coping skills
- reduce family friction and provide social support
- support participation in peer support groups
- encourage a sober peer network
- know the signs of relapse
- support your relative's involvement in meaningful, structured roles



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Help Your Relative Build Good Coping Skills

Stress is an inevitable part of life. So rather than trying to avoid all stress, it is wise to develop strategies for managing it. Everyday life always has its minor stressors, and we may encounter some larger ones, too: unexpected losses, starting or ending a close relationship, beginning a new job, moving, handling an illness in oneself or another person, or resolving a personal conflict. Your relative may need help with coping skills for these issues, and for dealing with persistent symptoms of the psychiatric disorder, such as depression, anxiety, sleep problems, hallucinations, or cravings to use substances.

You can help a loved one cope with stress and avoid stress-induced relapses by

- being there to listen, talk, and help your loved one process stressful experiences
- helping solve practical problems related to stress
- reminding your loved one of the coping strategies for dealing with distressing symptoms or cravings

Reduce Family Friction and Provide Social Support

High levels of conflict in close family relationships can be unpleasant for everyone. For people with co-occurring disorders, stress within the family can also contribute to relapses of the psychiatric disorder, the substance use, or both. Social support, on the other hand, can reduce stress and facilitate coping, which makes everyone feel good. You can reduce tension and offer support by

- developing good communication skills that minimize tension and maximize constructive support
- being flexible and resourceful in the face of problems
- letting each other know that you care and are concerned about each other
- spending positive time together that is rewarding for everyone

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Know the Signs of Relapse

Mental health disorders and addiction are often episodic; relapses of symptoms, or of substance use, can happen periodically. These relapses can disrupt not only your loved one's life, but the lives of other family members as well. How can you help prevent relapses? Know the early warning signs, and have a plan for addressing them if they appear.

Awareness of these "red flags" may take some care and thought. The warning signs of substance use relapse are often different from the signs of a psychiatric relapse—and those signs depend on the specific diagnosis. Moreover, each person's signs of relapse are unique to that person.

You can help prevent relapses or mini-mize their severity by

- knowing the person's own early warning signs of relapse
- monitoring the person to detect possible warning signs; keeping your eyes open and noticing changes
- developing a family plan in advance, together with the loved one, for responding to the signs of a possible impending relapse or an actual relapse
- involving other important people such as (treatment providers) in making a relapse prevention plan

Support Your Relative's Involvement in Meaningful, Structured Roles

Everyone has a need for meaning and a sense of purpose in their lives. Work, school, parenting, community involvement, participating in a cause or charitable work—these can provide a sense of purpose. But co-occurring disorders can disrupt involvement in such activities; sometimes maintaining an addiction has become the center of one's life. Regaining and developing these meaningful roles can help motivate your loved one to stay sober and manage the psychiatric disorder.

You can support a relative's involvement in meaningful roles by

- asking the loved one, "What kinds of activities have meaning for you? What roles would you like to take on in your life?"
- encouraging the loved one to pursue involvement in work, school, or other personally important roles right now—not waiting until other problems are "solved"
- letting the loved one know that personally important and meaningful goals are achievable, despite the co-occurring disorders and any previous setbacks

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Family members also may take over some of the person's roles or responsibilities, trying to minimize any immediate harm. While some degree of protection is understandable and desirable, it can backfire. If that protection is so extreme that it allows the person to keep using substances, or keep denying any mental health needs, it is no service to the person. Even if you don't intend it, offering such help can prolong addiction, delay treatment, and help the person avoid learning how to manage the disorders.

You can avoid enabling by

- not "covering" for the person: not making excuses for any substance- or mental health-related problems that interfere with work or social obligations
- refusing to provide money without appropriate supervision and knowledge of how it will be spent
- establishing expectations for the person's contribution to the household (if living together)



Fostering Growth

Don't let a loved one's disorder preclude his or her own personal growth—or yours. The development of co-occurring disorders can be a frightening, bewildering experience for everyone in the family.

When the acute symptoms or substance use problems are finally brought under control, everyone feels relieved. Sometimes this relief is so treasured that families become heavily invested in maintaining the status quo. They are afraid of any change that could rock the boat and upset the precarious balance that has been achieved. For example, if the person with the co-occurring disorders wants to return to school, take a challenging job, or deepen a close relationship, family members may discourage pursuing these goals out of fear that the stress involved could precipitate relapses.

Families should understand that their loved one can keep growing as a human being despite the co-occurring disorders. Personal growth occurs over one's whole lifetime, and, in fact, weathering challenges such as addiction and a psychiatric disorder can present unique growing opportunities. Encouraging growth involves making changes—and taking chances. You can address fears by making sure a relapse plan is in place, and by accepting that growth and learning from experience are essential to a high-quality life.

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Effective Communication

Every family needs ongoing communication about shared interests and concerns—running the household, recreational activities, and solving problems to name just a few.

Family members also need to be able to express feelings to each other, emotions such as happiness, anger, sadness, concern, and anxiety.



Effective communication serves as preventive maintenance, reassuring family members that they care about each other and appreciate each other's efforts. Good everyday communication can also make it easier to bring up issues, make requests when needed, and resolve conflict when it arises.

How Can Co-occurring Disorders Affect Communication in a Family?

When a family member has co-occurring disorders, communication may take extra effort and awareness on everyone's part. Sometimes a psychiatric disorder can hinder an individual's communication. For example, the person may

- withdraw and not talk when feeling depressed
- feel irritable, have angry outbursts, or behave unpredictably because of mood instability
- perceive other people inaccurately, which can lead to social anxiety or paranoia
- make unreasonable demands of others, or show a lack of concern for them, because of preoccupation with fears or anxiety
- miss or misinterpret common social cues, such as facial expressions or hints, which can lead to misunderstandings

These problems can be magnified when the person also has a substance use disorder. For example:

- Interactions with others can be influenced by the immediate effects of substance use, cravings, or withdrawal symptoms
- Addiction-related conflicts with others can arise, resulting from lies, broken promises, or failure to meet obligations.

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Expressing Negative Feelings

We all have negative feelings at times. Learning to express them constructively is crucial to resolving conflicts and getting along with others. To air negative feelings in a way that will help resolve them, try these steps:

1. Look at the person and talk with a serious tone of voice.
2. Tell the person what he or she did that displeased you.
3. Tell him or her how you feel as a result—be specific.
4. Make a request for change, if possible.

For example:

- *"I was worried when you didn't come home from work at your usual time. In the future, if you think you're going to be late, please call me."*
- *"I'm angry that you stopped taking your medication. Can we talk about what your concerns are and work out a way to get them addressed?"*

Making Compromises and Negotiating

People don't always agree on what they want to do together, how to achieve goals, or how to solve problems. Healthy, close relationships rely on some degree of "give and take," with each person giving as well as taking. When people disagree about something, being willing to compromise is an effective way to reach a resolution

Try these steps:

1. Explain your viewpoint.
2. Listen to the other person's viewpoint.
3. Repeat back what you heard (to show you understand).
4. Suggest a compromise.
5. Be open to talking over other possible compromises.

Requesting a Time-out

If feelings become very intense and heated, it can be hard to communicate effectively and resolve problems. Taking a break from intense feelings can provide time for people to calm down, collect their thoughts, and approach the situation as constructively as possible. To request a time-out, follow these steps:

1. Indicate that the situation is stress-ful for you.
2. Tell the person that the stress is interfering with constructive communication.
3. Explain that you would like to take a temporary break.
4. Say when you will be ready to talk again and problem-solve about the situation.

For example, you could say:

- *"I'm feeling stressed right now by this conversation. I'd like to take a break and discuss this later when I m feeling calmer."*

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