



CONNECTICUT Clearinghouse

A Program of Wheeler Clinic

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Affected Families: Helping Families and Children Cope with the Substance Use Disorder of Someone Close

A Library and Resource Center on Alcohol, Tobacco, Other Drugs, Mental Health and Wellness

Support for Families of People with Substance Use Disorders

People who have substance use disorders may become increasingly isolated from their families. Beyond the nuclear family, extended family members may have a range of emotions, including abandonment, anxiety, fear, anger, concern, embarrassment, guilt, and even the desire to ignore or cut ties with the person with a substance use disorder. But there is hope, and family members can play a critical role in supporting loved ones on their path of recovery—ultimately bringing healing to the entire family.

Treating the intricate needs of people who have family members with substance use disorders requires a team of professionals that extends beyond the support found in a traditional treatment and recovery setting. A child or other family member needs to recognize that he or she is not the cause of a relative's substance use. Another important lesson is that even though people can't "cure" their relative's substance use disorder, they can help the family member through recovery by caring for and supporting them. Learning how to treat substance use disorders just like any other chronic disease can help family members understand how to best support a relative who has a substance use disorder.

The Importance of the Family's Role in Treatment

Fortunately, family members can help people obtain treatment and work to erode societal stigmas against people in recovery by celebrating their successes. Substance use disorder treatment programs with family-oriented approaches can make a difference. Family therapy helps people with substance use disorders use a family's strengths and resources

to develop ways to live without alcohol and/or drugs.

Family therapy can also help the family make important relationship and environmental changes affecting the member with a substance use disorder. For example, therapy may help other family members work together more effectively and help their relatives set personal goals. Family therapy can also help families recognize their own needs and provide healing for each other, and help prevent substance use disorders from moving from one generation to another.

The Impact of Stigma and Discrimination within Families

While substance use disorders are medical conditions and treatment is highly effective, stigma and discrimination can plague people who are in recovery, even within families. Stigma and discrimination present barriers for people with substance use disorders who wish to access treatment. They also inhibit the ongoing recovery process. Stigma detracts from the character or reputation of a person. For many people, stigma can be a mark of disgrace. Stigma can keep family members from disclosing a relative's substance use disorder, which is counterproductive when they are trying to encourage the person to seek treatment. Results from a recent study suggest that families of people with a drug use disorder are viewed by society in the most stigmatizing manner, when compared to families of people with mental illness or emphysema. Society views them as more responsible for the onset of the disorder, and they may feel more ashamed of their family member.

Discrimination, on the other hand, is an act of prejudice. It can include denying someone employment, housing, accommodation, or other

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services based on the revelation that the person is receiving treatment or has previously been treated for a substance use disorder. Discrimination ignores the fact that substance use disorders can strike people of any age, gender, race, ethnicity, education level, and geographic area. Families report being blamed by other community members for a relative's disorder and accused of being responsible for any relapses the affected person may experience. Furthermore, family members are more directly affected by the disorder themselves and more likely to be socially avoided.

In particular, stigma and discrimination can affect parents whose children have a substance use disorder or are in recovery. Many families are more comfortable revealing that their child has depression or attention deficit disorder than disclosing that their child is using illegal substances, and are more willing to discuss the problem in a group setting to get help. Conversely, many family support specialists report that when the mental health diagnosis is more severe, such as a bipolar disorder, families find it more socially acceptable to talk about their child's substance use than to divulge that their child needs an antipsychotic medication. Yet there is a need for integrating treatment of both mental health and substance use disorders together when they co-occur in adolescents.

Families may fear potential consequences if they disclose a relative's illegal drug use, such as legal ramifications. However, a delay in receiving treatment can actually lead to more encounters with the police and court system. Once people with untreated substance use disorders find themselves in the criminal justice system, the system can give them access to treatment programs. In fact, there is an ongoing trend toward addressing drug use disorders with treatment, rather than with punishment. With this in mind, it is important to overcome stigma and help get affected family members an assessment by a health care professional as soon as any problem is recognized.

Talking about a family member's substance use disorder will, in fact, help combat societal stigma because when open discussion occurs, people will realize they aren't alone. Creating an open dialogue about overcoming stigma toward people with substance use disorders and their families can help build a stronger, healthier community.

Making a Difference: What Can I Do?

- ✓ **Participate in a family support group** such as Al-Anon/Alateen or Families Anonymous, where you can find others who have family members or close friends with substance use disorders. Listening to stories can help some people overcome negative perceptions about substance use disorders.
- ✓ **Become involved in your family member's treatment and recovery** and understand that substance use disorders can be treated just as other diseases can be treated.
- ✓ **Volunteer to be a mentor for a child** who has a parent or close relative with a substance use disorder. Mentors may serve as crucial educators and support figures, promoting learning and capability, providing exposure to positive influences, and helping youth realize their full potential.
- ✓ **Encourage pediatricians, schools, and other people** who routinely interact with children to identify those with parents who have substance use disorders and intervene to provide support.

United States Department of Health and Human Services
Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)
<http://www.recoverymonth.gov/2006/kit/html>