

Help for Loved Ones of Addicts

by Jerry Gatton

Having a loved one, whether child, sibling, spouse, parent, or friend, in active addiction is possibly one of the greatest heartaches you can know. It's like watching someone you love committing slow suicide and you are helpless to stop. Parents, especially Christian parents, may struggle with repetitive thoughts such as, "What did we do wrong?" "It's all my fault." "If only I hadn't ..." "If only I would have ..." Compounding the pain of grief is the pall of shame. Shame keeps you isolated from friends, your church, even other family members. You believe you don't dare let anyone know what a mess your child, spouse, sibling, or parent has made of their lives, and by extension, what a mess your life is. Take courage. God's grace is sufficient to heal shame and His presence can give you the comfort and strength you need to survive and, as incomprehensible as it may seem now, even to thrive.

Hebrews 4:16, NLT

¹⁶ So let us come boldly to the throne of our gracious God. There we will receive His mercy, and we will find grace to help us when we need it most.

Things you need to know:

You are not alone. According to the National Institute on Drug Abuse, 1 out of every 10 Americans over the age of 12 and 1 out of every 5 adults ages 18-25 has used an illicit drug in the past month. It's everywhere and affects more people than you probably realize. Almost two thirds of Americans have friends or family members who struggle with addiction. Think about that the next time you're sitting in church and feeling like a cockroach on a wedding cake. Your family is not somehow uniquely broken. You are not some special brand of spectacular failure as a parent, sibling, spouse, or child. You are not alone.

Ecclesiastes 7:20, NLT

²⁰ Not a single person on earth is always good and never sins.

Romans 3:23, NASB

²³ ...for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,

You can't do this alone. You must have a support group of friends who know exactly what is going on. You need the love, support, and prayers of fellow believers as the body of Christ wraps its arms around you and holds you while you mourn, holds your hand as you struggle, and holds you back when you compulsively seek to save your addict. Start by confiding in your pastor. Ask whether your church has a support group for those who have a loved one lost in addictions. Enlist the prayers of your small group. Empower a small group of spiritually mature people to confront you and to help you see *your* blind spots (and yes, you have them).

1 Corinthians 12:25-27, NLT

²⁵ This makes for harmony among the members, so that all the members care for each other.

²⁶ If one part suffers, all the parts suffer with it, and if one part is honored, all the parts are glad.

²⁷ All of you together are Christ's body, and each of you is a part of it.

You are powerless to change the addict. Al-Anon's three "C's" of dealing with an addict are true:

- You didn't Cause the addiction.
- You can't Control the addiction.
- You can't Cure the addiction.

From a biblical perspective, Ezekiel wrote:

Ezekiel 18:20, NASB

²⁰ ... The son will not bear the punishment for the father's iniquity, nor will the father bear the punishment for the son's iniquity; the righteousness of the righteous will be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked will be upon himself.

The addiction of your loved one is not your iniquity to repent of or to fix. The addict must repent. You cannot repent for them and you cannot force them to repent. Repentance is a gift that can only come from God.

2 Timothy 2:25-26, GWT

²⁵ ... be gentle in correcting those who oppose the Good News. Maybe God will allow them to change the way they think and act and lead them to know the truth. ²⁶ Then they might come back to their senses and God will free them from the devil's snare so that they can do his will.

If the addict resists change, change will not happen. This is true no matter how desperately you desire the addict to want to change. The addict has to want to change, not because you want them to change, but because they realize their life, as they are living it, has become unbearable and unmanageable and will, sooner rather than later, lead to their destruction.

Proverbs 1:30-33, NASB

*³⁰ "They would not accept my [wisdom's] counsel,
They spurned all my reproof.*

*³¹ So they shall eat of the fruit of their own way
And be satiated with their own devices.*

*³² For the waywardness of the naive will kill them,
And the complacency of fools will destroy them.*

*³³ But he who listens to me shall live securely
And will be at ease from the dread of evil."*

People who don't have a problem won't seek a solution. It is commonly said that the first step to change is admitting you have a problem. Until your addict admits they have a problem, they will not seek help to change. The problem is that they are being blinded (notice I said "they are being blinded" not "they are blind").

2 Corinthians 4:3-4, NASB

³And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, ⁴in whose case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.

Pray that the eyes of your addict's heart would be opened.

Ephesians 1:18-19a, NASB

¹⁸I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you will know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, ^{19a}and what is the surpassing greatness of His power toward us who believe.

The addict is powerless to change. Regardless of the definition of addiction you choose, loss of control is most likely a component of the definition. It doesn't matter whether you believe addiction is a disease or a sin or a little of both. If an addict could stop on their own, they would stop once the pain of the consequences became more compelling than the pleasure of the substance or behavior. Listen to the Bible's description of a drunkard and see the similarities to our modern understanding of addiction:

Proverbs 23:29-35, NLT

²⁹ Who has anguish? Who has sorrow?

Who is always fighting? Who is always complaining?

Who has unnecessary bruises? Who has bloodshot eyes?

*³⁰ It is the one who spends long hours in the taverns,
trying out new drinks.*

*³¹ Don't gaze at the wine, seeing how red it is,
how it sparkles in the cup, how smoothly it goes down.*

*³² For in the end it bites like a poisonous snake;
it stings like a viper.*

*³³ You will see hallucinations,
and you will say crazy things.*

*³⁴ You will stagger like a sailor tossed at sea,
clinging to a swaying mast.*

*³⁵ And you will say, "They hit me, but I didn't feel it.
I didn't even know it when they beat me up.*

*When will I wake up
so I can look for another drink?"*

Even those who claim not to have an addiction are addicted to something. If nothing else, the entire human race is addicted to sin.

Romans 7:14b-15,18-19, NLT

^{14b} The trouble is with me, for I am all too human, a slave to sin. ¹⁵ I don't really understand myself, for I want to do what is right, but I don't do it. Instead, I do what I hate. ...

¹⁸ And I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. I want to do what is right, but I can't. ¹⁹ I want to do what is good, but I don't. I don't want to do what is wrong, but I do it anyway.

Addicts lie, even when the truth is harmless. Having a loved one destroying themselves is bad enough, but addicts also tell lies. First and foremost they lie to themselves, but they will also lie to those who love them and then try to send you on a guilt trip if you voice your incredulity. For many, this is worse than the drug or alcohol use. You might be able to understand their addiction, but when they look you straight in the eyes and lie to your face, that's heartbreaking. They use lies to manipulate others (that generally includes you) so they can continue to use. Bottom line, never trust an addict's words or their behavior. Anyone can act normal for a season. When you begin to see positive changes over time, then you can begin to tentatively extend them trust.

Isaiah 44:20, NLT

²⁰ The poor, deluded fool feeds on ashes.

He trusts something that can't help him at all.

Yet he cannot bring himself to ask,

"Is this [idolatrous substance] that I'm holding in my hand a lie?"

Jeremiah 17:9, NASB

⁹ "The heart is more deceitful than all else

And is desperately sick;

Who can understand it?

You are not helping them when you give them money. Giving cash to any addict (and 99% of panhandlers) is like handing them a loaded gun and asking them to play Russian roulette. Even giving them money indirectly is destructive (such as buying them food or paying their phone bill). You are not helping them when you rescue them from the financial consequences of their poor choices. Remember, they won't change until their life of addiction becomes unbearable.

Luke 17:1, personal translation

¹ Jesus said to His disciples, Temptations (cravings, the enticement to sin) are sure to come, but woe to him through whom they come (who enables them)!

Don't worry, nobody starves (or should even be hungry) in Olympia. There are plenty of resources where people can get hot meals or food to prepare. If your loved one says they need food, direct them to the Mission, the Salvation Army, 1st Baptist Church of Olympia, or the Thurston County Food Bank.

Luke 12:22-24, NASB

²² And He said to His disciples, "For this reason I say to you, do not worry about your life, as to what you will eat; nor for your body, as to what you will put on. ²³ For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing. ²⁴ Consider the ravens, for they neither sow nor reap; they have no storeroom nor barn, and yet God feeds them; how much more valuable you are than the birds!"

Love your addict. When you refuse to help them and allow them to experience the painful consequences of their poor choices, you get out of God's way so He can deal with them. Even when they say they hate you, continue to love them. Remember, addicts lie to manipulate. "I hate you" is a great way to manipulate a loved one into getting them do what you want.

Proverbs 27:6, NASB

*⁶ Faithful are the wounds of a friend,
But deceitful are the kisses of an enemy.*

Proverbs 28:23, NASB

*²³ He who rebukes a man will afterward find more favor
Than he who flatters with the tongue.*

Pray for your addict.¹ Pray for them using the Scriptures. Here is a model you might follow:

Lord, help _____ to listen to what You say, and to treasure Your commands. Attune _____'s ears to wisdom, and help him/her concentrate on understanding (Proverbs 2:1-2). Instruct _____ in the way of wisdom and lead him/her along straight paths (Proverbs 4:11). Create in _____ a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within him/her (Psalm 51:10). Though you have made _____ see troubles, many and bitter, you will restore _____'s life again; from the depths of the earth you will again bring him/her up. You will increase _____'s honor and comfort him/her once again (Psalm 71:20-21). Thank You that Your word says "that nothing can ever separate _____ from God's love. Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow – not even the powers of hell can separate _____ from God's love. No power in the sky above or in the earth below – indeed, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate _____ from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:38-39).

¹ Adapted from "7 Ways to Pray When Your Child Goes Astray", Cindi McMenamin, <http://www.crosswalk.com/family/parenting/7-ways-to-pray-when-your-child-goes-astray.html>

Pray for the wisdom to know when and what to say to your addict.

Lord, Your Word says "If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him" (James 1:5). Lord, I need that kind of wisdom to know when to speak to _____ and when to be silent. "Do not let any unwholesome talk (lecturing, judging, or accusing) come of (my) mouth, but only what is helpful for building (my children) up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen" (Ephesians 4:29). Let me also be "quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, for (my) anger doesn't bring about the righteous life that God desires" (James 1:19).

it carries more weight. That is why it is so important that your addict finds a good recovery group and an accountability partner/sponsor.

Even when your addict is clean and sober, they may not be in recovery Being clean and sober is an external state. It comes when an addict stops using or acting out in other addictive ways. If this is only as deep as the addict's recovery goes, they are nothing more than a Pharisee, trying to be good by modifying their behaviors. Jesus described them this way:

Matthew 23:27-28, NIV

²⁷ "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean. ²⁸ In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness.

There is a name for this state in secular recovery circles: dry drunk. A dry drunk has stopped the addictive behavior but has not changed on the inside. As a result, they are usually very difficult to be around. Imagine this, they have all the pain and shame they were self-medicating but without their drug of choice to take the edge off.

Recovery is a fragile, precious gift. Recovery is transformation that happens from the inside to the outside. As the addict's heart is transformed, their behavior will change. Once recovery is achieved, all the powers of hell will descend on your addict, trying to draw him or her back into their addiction. Placing a high priority and value on recovery, cultivating strong and reliable accountability, and surrendering fully to the will of God will protect them and strengthen their recovery. Still, even with these safeguards in place, relapse is possible. If you suspect relapse or a significant craving to relapse, talk to your addict. Your warnings may not be heard or if they are, they may not be taken seriously. If that happens, every fiber of your being will yearn to give your warning a little louder and a little more frequently, but don't do it. You will not argue or browbeat your recovering addict into transparency or change.

A note about acute withdrawal timeframes for specific substances. Acute withdrawal is what an addict sometimes experiences when they abruptly discontinue using their drug of choice. These symptoms usually begin within hours or days after the last time they used. How long they last depends on the substance.

Substance	Acute Withdrawal Timeframe
Alcohol*	5–7 days
Benzodiazepines*	1–4 weeks; 3–5 weeks with tapering (i.e., reducing dosage gradually)
Cannabis	5 days
Nicotine	2–4 weeks
Opioids	4–10 days (methadone withdrawal may last 14–21 days)
Stimulants (e.g., amphetamines, methamphetamine, cocaine)	1–2 weeks

A note about post-acute withdrawal. Many addicts experience protracted withdrawal, also known as post-acute withdrawal syndrome or PAWS. Protracted withdrawal is a pattern of negative symptoms², primarily mental and emotional, that persists after the last vestiges the drugs and/or alcohol have been eliminated from the body and brain. These symptoms may lead to relapse if not understood. How long these symptoms last depends on the constitution of your recovering addict and the substance of abuse.³

Accountability is key. Your recovering addict needs a healthy mix of people in his or her accountability team. Every accountability team should have, at a minimum, someone who has been in recovery for a while, a spiritual mentor, a close friend, and their 12-step sponsor if they have one. Each member of the accountability team should know who the other members are and how to get in contact with them. You should also have their contact information and permission from your recovering addict to contact their accountability team if you have concerns. This is their life you are fighting for.

There is strength and healing to be found in a solid accountability team.

Ecclesiastes 4:12, NASB

¹² And if one can overpower him who is alone, two can resist him. A cord of three strands is not quickly torn apart.

Proverbs 27:17, NASB

*¹⁷ Iron sharpens iron,
So one man sharpens another.*

² These symptoms may include anxiety, persistent fatigue, alcohol or drug cravings, problems with short-term memory, sleep problems, difficulty concentrating, and impaired executive control (e.g., impulse control, solving problems, making decisions).

³ For more information, see SAMHSA’s Substance Abuse Treatment Advisory, volume 9, issue 1, at <https://store.samhsa.gov/system/files/sma10-4554.pdf>

Hebrews 10:24-25, NASB

²⁴ and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, ²⁵ not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near.

Galatians 6:1-2, NASB

¹ Brethren, even if anyone is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; each one looking to yourself, so that you too will not be tempted. ² Bear one another's burdens, and thereby fulfill the law of Christ.

James 5:16, NASB

¹⁶ Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another so that you may be healed. The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much.

Final thoughts. Here are some final thoughts about your part in your addict's recovery:

- Remain vigilant without shaming your recovering addict (often a delicate balance, especially when you have been lied to and betrayed by your addict in the past).
- Build a relapse profile. There is a list of possible warning signs of relapse in appendix A. Become familiar with them, especially those behaviors that fit your addict's behavior patterns.
- Trust your instincts (or better yet, the prompting of the Holy Spirit).
- If you can't decide whether there is a problem or not, contact the accountability team. They can help you sort fact (what you are seeing is in fact the beginning of a relapse) from fear (you are projecting your fear of a relapse onto your recovering addict).
- Do not wait for your recovering addict to come to you when they begin to struggle with cravings and old self-defeating behaviors. Do not be hurt or disappointed when they don't. They most likely will not initiate a frank conversation with you about the struggles they are experiencing.⁴
- When you initiate that frank conversation, be aware that they may have subconsciously determined to relapse. Maybe it's plausible deniability, but if the decision to relapse is subconscious, the recovering addict may not be aware of the danger they are in and deny that they are struggling. In this case, you may want to preemptively apply Matthew 18:15-17.

Matthew 18:15-17, NASB

¹⁵ "If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother. ¹⁶ But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact may be confirmed. ¹⁷ If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.

⁴ There are many reasons this may be. They may keep their struggles hidden out of shame. They may be confusing temptation with guilt. They may fear triggering your fear which may further lead to your rejection.

Both you and your recovering addict have a long road ahead of you, but there is hope for both today and tomorrow in Jesus Christ.

1 Peter 1:3-6, NASB

³Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, ⁴to obtain an inheritance which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, ⁵who are protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. ⁶In this you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials...

Appendix A. Warning Signs of Relapse

Defensiveness. Getting defensive or angry when anyone brings up any of these warning signs.

Keeping secrets. Keeping unexpectedly strong cravings or thoughts of using a secret. Doubting your ability to stay sober but don't tell anyone. Keeping changes in your circumstances secret from healthy friends and accountability partners.

Distance from God. Not reading your Bible. Praying but only when you need something. Believing you don't need God's people or His church to live a healthy, balanced life. God isn't important to you.

Skipping meetings or church. Feeling you no longer need meetings or church, like they are a waste of your time. Having "better" things to do with your time.

Avoiding accountability. Instead of reaching out to others for support and advice, you avoid the people who want to help you stay clean and sober. You avoid talking about problems or recovery.

Romanticizing past drug use. Fondly reminiscing about the good times when you were using, but not (or minimizing) the negative consequences.

Believing you can use again. Believing you're fixed and can have "just one drink" or that you can use recreationally without it getting out of control again. Believing you can use marijuana because "it's natural and not addictive" without it affecting your sobriety.

Overconfidence in sobriety. Feeling like you can handle any situation. Letting your guard down and believing you don't need to remain vigilant in your recovery.

Denial. Questioning whether you ever really had a problem, denying to others that you have a problem.

Negative thinking or losing hope. Feeling that life is hopeless (the future seems dark) and that your past will haunt you forever. Believing you will never be able to get past the damage you've done, that it's too late to start over and have a life.

Running on anger and anxiety. Feeling like things are getting out of control and responding with anger and anxiety for the energy to keep things together.

Risky situations. Going out of your way to pass old familiar places associated with your addiction. Beginning to stop at or hang out at places you used to use.

Increased or inescapable stress. Living in a place or situation you feel you can't escape or bear.

Aggravations and unexpected changes make you feel like you can't keep it all together. You dread each morning, waking up and wishing it were night again.

Life out of balance. Working too much or too little, getting too much or too little exercise, overeating or not eating enough.

Ingratitude. Complaining about everything. Profound discontent. Nothing is as it could or should be. You don't have what you deserve and what you have seems worthless.

Center of chaos. Always seeming to be in the middle of conflict and chaos. Stirring up trouble to shift the focus away from you or to provide the justification to go use.

Unreliable. Breaking commitments, neglecting responsibilities. Overcommitting or committing to obligations you never wanted, then breaking your word without warning or backing out at the last minute.

Feeling anxious. Excessive worry, black and white thinking, catastrophizing problems, dread of social situations, trouble falling or staying asleep.

Feeling depressed. Nothing is fun, sleeping too much or too little, difficulty concentrating, unable to let go of guilt and shame.

Unrelenting pain. Suffering pain in your back, knees, shoulder, or wherever and the pain never stops.

Old or new using friends. Making new or returning to old friends who use. Do not be misled, bad company corrupts good character (1 Co 15:33), *every time*.

New relationship. The drug of choice for co-dependents, but still dangerous addicts in general, especially if you are keeping the new relationship a secret from your sponsor or your pastor. The craving for significance and fear of rejection leads to changes in priority (the new relationship becomes all-important). The craving for physical intimacy leads to momentary moral lapses and sex outside of marriage.

Unmet needs. Legitimate needs and desires are going unmet and you aren't asking for help. Having cravings (illegitimate needs) that suddenly feel like unyielding, incessant demands.

Simmering resentment, unforgiveness. Becoming passive-aggressive or actively wanting to hurt those who

have wronged you. Fully convinced that the person who harmed you is getting away with it.

Autopilot. Experiencing times when you stop thinking and let yourself do things you can't explain later.

Easily angered or annoyed. Overreacting, becoming furious, often without warning and over increasingly smaller provocations. Getting into arguments with acquaintances and loved ones more frequently.

Self-centered. Only being concerned about your own safety, comfort, and well-being. The well-being and feelings of others are of only secondary concern if at all.

Changes in attitude or priorities. Quitting a job without having another one, old plans no longer seem desirable or fulfilling, sudden changes in attitude, more selfish and moody, or feelings of loneliness.

Pleasure-seeking. Searching for things that can replicate the pleasure experienced when using. When none are to be found, cravings for your substance increase in strength and frequency.

Loss of belief in recovery program. A sudden shift in your confidence in your recovery program.

Isolation. Physical or emotional. Hiding in room or home, refusing to see friends, and keeping your distance from family members. You won't share your grief, fears, resentments, or temptations with others.

Loss of interest in family, friends, and activities. When problems start to mount and the temptation to use gets stronger, you begin to withdraw from people and activities you once enjoyed.

Relationship breakup. Losing an important relationship. Feeling lonely, unlovable, inadequate, guilty, or ashamed.

Sudden appearance of withdrawal symptoms. This is one of the most telling signs of relapse because it means that you have begun using again.

Exhaustion. Feeling completely spent. There's nothing left in the tank to keep depression, hopelessness, and problems at bay. Relapse feels inevitable.

No goals, plans, or purpose. Feeling directionless, stagnant, useless. Spending time pointlessly or frivolously. Craving significance but feeling powerless, frozen, hopeless, afraid to try.

Appendix B. Resources

Websites that may help:

The Envoy Group - free assistance in finding residential treatment centers for teenagers at risk or in addiction (<http://www.theenvoygroup.com>) or call (903) 309-0830

Hope for Families of Addicts - Terri Blackstock (<http://terriblackstock.com/hope-for-families-of-addicts/>)

National Institute on Drug Addiction - publications for parents (<https://www.drugabuse.gov/publications/finder/t/48/parents>)

Parents of Addicted Loved Ones - offers telephonic support groups (<https://palgroup.org/>)

Al-Anon (<http://al-anon.org/home>) or Nar-Anon (<http://www.nar-anon.org/>) for support groups for the loved ones of addicts.

Focus on the Family series on Battling Drug and Alcohol Abuse (<http://www.focusonthefamily.com/lifechallenges/abuse-and-addiction/substance-abuse/battling-drug-and-alcohol-abuse>)

CareLeader article "3 common mistakes of addicts' families" (<http://www.careleader.org/helping-family/>)

Ligonier Ministries article "Addictions and Idolatry" for a biblical model of addiction (<http://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/addictions-and-idolatry/>)

7 Ways to Pray When Your Child Goes Astray, by Cindi McMenamin (<http://www.crosswalk.com/family/parenting/7-ways-to-pray-when-your-child-goes-astray.html>)

Books that may help:

Addictions: A Banquet in the Grave, by Edward Welch. This is perhaps the best book available on addiction from a biblical perspective. Welch wrote this book for both addicts and their loved ones, so it has firm biblical guidance for both.

The Heart of Addiction, by Mark E. Shaw. Another excellent book that also explains addiction from a biblical perspective.

Thorns in the Heart: A Christian's Guide to Dealing with Addiction, by Steven Stiles. This book is broader in its scope, addressing not only addiction but our responses to emotional pain, circumstances, and relationships in general.