

Family Support in Early Recovery

Family Guide · The Recovery Files

In the app only: the self-assessments Communication, Family Health, Support Readiness (scored, so they stay in the app).

The Understanding Substance Use Disorder guide has its own printable PDF in the Family guides library.

The Common Recovery Challenges guide has its own printable PDF in the Family guides library.

The Understanding Boundaries guide has its own printable PDF in the Family guides library.

Family Support in Early Recovery

A Comprehensive Guide for Families Supporting Loved Ones in Substance Use Disorder and Mental Health Recovery

Welcome

When a loved one enters early recovery from substance use disorder or mental health challenges, family members often experience a complex mix of emotions: hope, fear, uncertainty, relief, and sometimes exhaustion. You may find yourself wondering: How do I support them without enabling? What should I say? How do I take care of myself while caring about them?

This interactive worksheet is designed to help you navigate this challenging but hopeful time. Through education, self-reflection, and practical exercises, you'll develop the skills and understanding needed to support your loved one's recovery while maintaining your own wellbeing.

What You'll Learn:

- Understand what your loved one is experiencing in early recovery
- Assess your current communication patterns, family health, and support readiness
- Learn constructive communication techniques backed by research
- Practice new skills through interactive worksheets
- Develop a personal action plan for supporting your loved one while caring for yourself

Important Reminders

- You cannot control your loved one's recovery—only your own responses
- Your wellbeing matters and is essential to providing effective support
- Setbacks may be part of the process—they don't mean failure
- Professional help (therapy, family programs, support groups) is valuable
- This worksheet is educational—not a substitute for professional treatment

How to Use This Worksheet

This worksheet is designed to be completed over several sessions. Your progress is automatically saved to your browser, so you can return at any time.

- 1. Read through the educational sections first
- 2. Complete all three self-assessments honestly
- 3. Work through the interactive worksheets
- 4. Develop your personal action plan
- 5. Return periodically to reassess and track progress

Your Starting Point

What is your relationship to the person in recovery?

[Select your relationship... / Spouse/Partner / Parent / Adult Child / Sibling / Grandparent / Other Family Member / Close Friend]

How long has your loved one been in their current recovery attempt?

[Select timeframe... / Less than 30 days / 1-3 months / 3-6 months / 6-12 months / More than 1 year / Not yet started]

What brings you to this worksheet today?

Understanding Early Recovery

What Your Loved One May Be Experiencing

What Happens in Early Recovery

Early recovery is a period of significant change and adjustment. Your loved one is not simply "stopping" a behavior—they are fundamentally rewiring their brain, rebuilding their life, and learning new ways of coping. Understanding what they're going through can help you provide more effective support.

Physical Changes

- Brain healing: The brain needs time to restore normal dopamine function and develop new neural pathways. This process takes months to years.
- Post-Acute Withdrawal Syndrome (PAWS): Physical symptoms like fatigue, sleep disturbances, and cognitive difficulties that can persist for months after stopping substance use.
- Energy fluctuations: Your loved one may experience periods of extreme fatigue or restlessness as their body readjusts.

Psychological Adjustments

- Emotional regulation: Without substances to numb or escape emotions, your loved one may experience intense feelings they're not used to managing.
- Identity reconstruction: They are learning who they are without substances—this is exciting but also disorienting.
- Shame and guilt: Processing the impact of their addiction on themselves and others can be overwhelming.
- Co-occurring mental health: Depression, anxiety, and trauma are common companions to substance use disorders and may become more apparent in recovery.

Social Adjustments

- Relationship repair: Your loved one may be dealing with shame, guilt, and the need to rebuild trust with family and friends.
- Social network changes: They may need to distance from people and places associated with use while building new, supportive connections.

- Life restructuring: Building new routines, finding meaning and purpose, and addressing practical matters (employment, legal issues, finances) that may have been neglected.

The Stages of Change

Change doesn't happen all at once. The Transtheoretical Model describes how people move through stages of readiness for change. Understanding where your loved one is can help you provide stage-appropriate support.

Precontemplation

Not yet recognizing or accepting that there's a problem. May be defensive or minimize concerns.

How to support: Express concern without lecturing. Focus on building connection rather than trying to convince.

Contemplation

Acknowledging there may be a problem but ambivalent about change. Weighing pros and cons.

How to support: Help explore concerns without pushing. Listen more than you advise. Ask open-ended questions.

Preparation

Decided to change and making plans. May be researching treatment options or setting a quit date.

How to support: Offer practical help. Research resources together. Express confidence in their ability to change.

Action

Actively working on behavior change. Implementing new strategies and building new patterns.

How to support: Acknowledge efforts and progress. Be patient with mood changes. Help with practical adjustments.

Maintenance

Working to sustain gains and prevent return to use. Building a new life in recovery.

How to support: Continue celebrating milestones. Maintain healthy boundaries. Support ongoing recovery activities.

Remember: Change is rarely linear. People often cycle back through stages, and that's normal. A return to an earlier stage doesn't mean failure—it's part of the process.

What Helps vs. What Hurts

What Generally Helps

- Expressing love and concern without conditions
- Listening without immediately trying to fix
- Acknowledging effort and progress, however small

- Maintaining consistent, healthy boundaries
- Allowing natural consequences while remaining supportive
- Educating yourself about addiction and recovery
- Taking care of your own wellbeing
- Being patient with the process
- Offering practical support when appropriate
- Communicating openly and honestly
- Respecting their autonomy and choices
- Celebrating recovery milestones

What Generally Hurts

- Enabling behaviors (covering up, making excuses, providing money)
- Shaming, blaming, or using guilt
- Bringing up past mistakes constantly
- Making threats you won't follow through on
- Trying to control their recovery
- Expecting immediate or perfect change
- Neglecting your own needs completely
- Treating relapse as total failure
- Isolating yourself from support
- Avoiding all discussion of the issue
- Hovering, checking constantly, or being hypervigilant
- Making their recovery the center of your life

Reflection Exercise

Based on what you've learned, what stage of change do you think your loved one is currently in?

What's one thing you've been doing that "hurts" that you could try to change?

What's one "helpful" behavior you'd like to do more consistently?

Constructive Communication

Expressing Concerns While Maintaining Connection

The Power of "I" Statements

"I" statements are a powerful communication tool that allows you to express your feelings and concerns without putting others on the defensive. They shift the focus from blaming to sharing your experience.

The Basic Structure:

"I feel [emotion] when [specific behavior] because [impact on you]."

❌ "You" Statements (Accusatory)

- "You never think about how your actions affect this family."
- "You're so selfish and irresponsible."
- "You always make promises you don't keep."
- "You don't care about anyone but yourself."

✓ "I" Statements (Constructive)

- "I feel worried when I don't hear from you because I care about your safety."
- "I feel hurt when plans are cancelled because I was looking forward to spending time together."
- "I feel anxious when commitments aren't kept because I want to be able to count on our plans."
- "I feel overwhelmed when I don't know what's happening because I want to support you."

Focus on Behavior, Not Character

One of the most important distinctions in constructive communication is between addressing a behavior and attacking a person's character. When we make someone feel fundamentally flawed rather than pointing to a specific action, they're less likely to hear our concern and more likely to become defensive.

Character Attacks:

- "You're a liar."
- "You're so irresponsible."
- "You're just like your father."
- "You don't care about anyone."
- "You'll never change."

Behavior Focus:

- "When you said X and Y happened, I felt confused about what was true."
- "The bill wasn't paid on time, and I'm wondering what happened."
- "I noticed this specific pattern that concerns me."

- "When you missed the event, I felt hurt."
- "I'm seeing progress in these areas, and I'm still concerned about this one thing."

Key Insight: Separating the person from the behavior is also important for families. Your loved one is not their addiction—they are a person who has an addiction. This distinction helps maintain connection while still addressing problems.

Timing Your Conversations

Even the most carefully worded message can backfire if delivered at the wrong time. Learning to assess readiness—both yours and your loved one's—can make the difference between a productive conversation and a destructive one.

Good Times for Difficult Conversations:

- When both parties are calm and rested
- In private, without an audience
- When there's enough time to talk without rushing
- When your loved one is sober and clear-headed
- When you've had time to calm down from any triggering event
- After positive interactions, when connection is strong

Times to Avoid:

- When either person is intoxicated or impaired
- In the heat of anger or immediately after an incident
- In front of others (especially children)
- When either person is exhausted or hungry
- During or right before important events
- When you're feeling emotionally overwhelmed

Reflection Exercise

Think of a recent conversation that didn't go well. How might using "I" statements have changed it?

What character attacks have you used that you could reframe as behavior-focused feedback?

What are your typical patterns around timing? Do you tend to bring things up too quickly, or avoid difficult conversations altogether?

Worksheet: "I" Statements Practice

Transforming How You Express Concerns

Transform These Statements

Rewrite each accusatory statement as a constructive "I" statement using the formula: "I feel [emotion] when [specific behavior] because [impact]."

Original: "You never listen to me!"

Hint: Think about what you feel and why listening matters to you.

Original: "You're so selfish—you only think about yourself!"

Hint: Consider what specific action triggered this feeling.

Original: "You always lie to me!"

Hint: Focus on a specific instance and how it affected you.

Original: "You don't care about this family!"

Hint: What behavior made you feel uncared for?

Original: "You're going to throw your life away!"

Hint: Express your fear and concern without predicting the future.

Your Real Situations

Think of three real concerns you have. Write them first as you might naturally say them, then rewrite as "I" statements.

Situation 1

How I might naturally say it:

Rewritten as an "I" statement:

Situation 2

How I might naturally say it:

Rewritten as an "I" statement:

Situation 3

How I might naturally say it:

Rewritten as an "I" statement:

Worksheet: Behavior vs. Character

Separating the Person from the Problem

Reframe Character Attacks

For each character attack below, rewrite it to focus on specific, observable behavior instead.

Character Attack: "You're a liar."

Hint: Focus on a specific instance of dishonesty

Character Attack: "You're so lazy."

Hint: Name specific tasks or responsibilities

Character Attack: "You're a disappointment."

Hint: Identify the specific expectation that wasn't met

Character Attack: "You're manipulative."

Hint: Describe the specific behavior that felt manipulative

Character Attack: "You're hopeless."

Hint: Focus on your feelings without making predictions

Separating the Person from the Addiction

List 5 positive qualities about your loved one that exist separately from their addiction:

What behaviors do you observe that you believe are influenced by the addiction (not their true character)?

How might this distinction help you in your interactions with them?

Worksheet: Timing Your Conversations

Choosing the Right Moment

Pre-Conversation Checklist

Before having a difficult conversation, run through this checklist:

- ☐ I am calm and not in a heightened emotional state
- ☐ **My loved one appears calm and clear-headed**
- ☐ We have enough time to have this conversation without rushing
- ☐ **We are in a private setting**
- ☐ I know what I want to say and have thought about my wording
- ☐ I am clear on my goal for this conversation
- ☐ **I have eaten and am not overly tired**
- ☐ This is not immediately after an incident (I've had time to process)
- ☐ **I am prepared to listen as well as speak**

☐ I am ready to accept that the conversation may not go as planned

Planning an Upcoming Conversation

What conversation do you need to have?

When would be a good time to have this conversation?

What will you do if the timing doesn't feel right when the moment comes?

Worksheet: Family Self-Care

Taking Care of Yourself While Supporting Others

Self-Care Action Plan

What area of self-care needs the most attention right now?

What is one small step you can take this week to improve self-care in that area?

What are your warning signs that you're becoming overwhelmed or burned out?

List 5 things you can do in 5 minutes or less to help yourself calm down or feel better:

Worksheet: Boundaries & Supporting Without Enabling

Finding the Balance

Supporting vs. Enabling

For each scenario, identify whether the action is more likely supporting recovery or enabling addiction:

Giving money when asked without questions

☐ Supporting

☐ Enabling

Offering to drive them to a meeting

☐ Supporting

☐ Enabling

Lying to their employer about why they missed work

☐ Supporting

☐ Enabling

Expressing concern about behavior you've noticed

☐ Supporting

☐ Enabling

Bailing them out of jail after a substance-related arrest

☐ Supporting

☐ Enabling

Helping them research treatment options

☐ Supporting

☐ Enabling

My Boundaries

What are 3 boundaries you need to establish or strengthen?

Write a boundary statement: "I love you AND I [boundary]. If [violation], I will [consequence]."

What aspects of your loved one's recovery are you trying to control that aren't actually within your control?

Family Action Plan

Putting It All Together

Summary of Key Insights

What are the most important things you learned from this worksheet?

My Commitments

Communication Commitments

Self-Care Commitments

Boundary Commitments

This Week's Actions

List 5 specific actions you will take this week:

- 1 _____
- 2 _____
- 3 _____
- 4 _____
- 5 _____

Support & Accountability

Who can support you in following through on these commitments?

When will you review and reassess your progress?

My Commitment Statement

Write a personal commitment statement summarizing your intentions:

Resources & Next Steps

Continuing Your Journey

Support Groups for Families

Al-Anon Family Groups

Support for families and friends of people with alcohol problems.

www.al-anon.org

Nar-Anon

Support for families and friends of people with drug addiction.

www.nar-anon.org

SMART Recovery Family & Friends

Science-based support program for families.

www.smartrecovery.org/family

NAMI (National Alliance on Mental Illness)

Support and education for families affected by mental illness.

www.nami.org

Crisis Resources

SAMHSA National Helpline

24/7 treatment referral service (free, confidential)

1-800-662-4357

988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline

24/7 crisis support

Call or Text 988

Recommended Reading

"Codependent No More" by Melody Beattie

"Beyond Addiction" by Jeffrey Foote et al.

"Beautiful Boy" by David Sheff

"The Language of Letting Go" by Melody Beattie

"Boundaries" by Henry Cloud and John Townsend

A Final Note

Supporting a loved one through recovery is one of the most challenging things a family member can do. Remember:

- You are not alone in this journey
- Your own wellbeing matters and is essential
- Progress, not perfection, is the goal
- Recovery is possible for your loved one—and for your family

Consider returning to this worksheet periodically to reassess, track progress, and adjust your approach as circumstances change.