

Keeping Healthy Boundaries When Supporting Someone with a Substance Use Issue

•Unhelpful helping •Co-dependency•Developing healthier boundaries•Accessing support

It's natural to want to help a relative or friend who has a problem with alcohol or drugs—and someone in this situation *does* need understanding and support—but sometimes, good intentions can backfire.

When a person's substance use problem becomes worse, those closest to them may take extraordinary steps to help them. For example, a partner may take on extra hours at work to make up for loss of income if the other partner was fired from their job. A parent whose child has spent their savings on drugs may give them money to cover rent and other living costs, even if it means creating undue hardship for themselves.

Taking these extraordinary steps is usually done from a place of love and concern and, to some extent, can be expected. But problems arise when someone gives *too* much. Focusing most or all of your energy on another person's wellbeing can limit how much you can give to yourself. Families and loved ones of people with substance use concerns often struggle with maintaining healthy boundaries while trying to help their loved one get better or stay safe while in the throes of addiction.

Unhelpful helping

Sometimes, the support provided to a person with a substance use concern may harm more than it helps. This can be called "enabling" if the behaviour allows the person to continue their substance use. Figuring out where the line is between helping and enabling can be very difficult and can depend on your perspective. Calling your child's employer to tell them your child is sick when in fact they're hungover can both harm *and* help. It can harm because it prevents your child from feeling the full effect of their behaviour, and it helps by protecting them from losing their job, which could escalate the addiction further.

Although there is no surefire way of knowing if a behaviour counts as unhelpful helping, the following questions can give you insight into its impacts:

- In what ways does this behaviour help the person?
- In what ways is this behaviour unhelpful or harmful to them, even if this isn't intentional on my part?
- How do I feel when I help them in this way (before, during, and afterward)?
- What am I hoping will happen when I do this? Have these hopes been realized?
- Does helping them ever result in me neglecting my own needs? If so, how does this impact our relationship?
- What might happen if I didn't help them in this way anymore (both short-term and long-term)?

Co-dependency

Co-dependency happens when someone is overly concerned with someone else's problems, to the point that they dismiss or neglect their own needs. It's a relationship pattern characterized by unhealthy boundaries, excessive caretaking, low self-esteem, fear of rejection or abandonment, and "people pleasing." It can happen in any relationship, including between a person with a substance use concern and someone supporting them. Like unhelpful helping, it's not always clear whether a relationship involves co-dependency, but possible signs include:

- difficulty saying "no"
- frequently putting the other person's needs ahead of your own
- not communicating directly
- trouble making decisions
- rationalizing problematic behaviour
- difficulty spending time alone
- pleasing others to avoid rejection or discomfort
- excessive need to be needed
- difficulty identifying or expressing feelings

Although co-dependency is an unhealthy relationship pattern, it often starts from a place of care and concern. Part of addressing co-dependency is moving toward interdependence, which involves mutual give and take between two people. *Interdependence* strikes a balance between self-reliance and independence on one hand, and attachment and support on the other.

So, how can someone work toward this balance? Boundaries play a key role.

Developing healthier boundaries

Boundaries come into play with many relationship challenges, including difficulties in relationships where substance use has become a problem. They help protect you from feeling responsible for another person's problems, support you in sharing your thoughts, feelings, and needs, and set expectations about how you want to be treated.

Each person's boundaries will look different, but here are some boundaries that may be especially helpful when supporting someone with a substance use concern:

- Not making excuses ("rationalizing") or covering up another person's behaviour.
- Allowing another person to make mistakes and experience consequences related to their choices.
- Accepting that you cannot control someone else's behaviour or choices.
- Sharing your thoughts, feelings, and beliefs, even if someone else disagrees.
- Not putting up with mistreatment or abuse.
- Allowing yourself to say no.
- Only making offers to help that you are comfortable with and/or don't compromise your integrity or sense of self.

There are understandable reasons why someone may struggle with setting any of these boundaries. Don't blame yourself if you have found this difficult. Again, unhelpful helping and giving too much of yourself usually comes from a good place. Seek support if you need help establishing healthier boundaries or aren't sure how to offer your loved one the support they need.

Accessing support

The following supports can help you address unhelpful helping and co-dependency:

Support programs

In support programs, people meet regularly and talk with others who have similar problems. These self-help programs provide an opportunity to learn from others facing similar situations and a systematic way for participants to learn healthier forms of behaviour. You may benefit from attending regular meetings of a group that helps people with co-dependency. You might try [Co-Dependents Anonymous](#), [Al-Anon/Alateen Family Groups](#) for families and friends of alcoholics, or [Nar-Anon Family Groups](#) for people who are close with addicts.

Psychotherapy

Individual or group therapy can help you overcome unhelpful behaviours and develop new coping skills. It can also help you cope with any mental health issues that have resulted from relationship challenges.

Your doctor

Your doctor can give you a referral to a counsellor who has experience working with individuals who struggle with co-dependency. A physician may also be able to tell you about helpful community resources.

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