FAMILY SUPPORT · ARTICLE

My Adult Child Is Addicted. What Do I Do?

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Should I give them money? Should I let them stay at home? What do I say? Is this my fault? When do I stop? Is it time to give up?

As a clinical practitioner who has worked extensively with families affected by alcohol or drug addiction, I am often asked these same questions. If you are asking them too, you are in the right place.

Supporting an adult child with addiction: there is no black-and-white rulebook

The honest answer to almost every one of those questions is "it depends". It depends on the substance, and how long it has been going on. It depends on your child's age and health, and whether they are safe. It depends on what has already been tried, what your finances and your other children can bear, and whether your child is anywhere near ready to change. Two families can face what looks like the same situation and need opposite responses.

That is why rigid rules ("always do this", "never do that") rarely survive contact with a real family. What does exist is a set of things that help in almost every case: understanding what you are dealing with, a clear idea of your own limits, support for yourself, and the skills to stay steady when things get hard. The rest of this article walks through them.

111 One exception to "it depends": if anyone is in immediate danger, including your child, call 111.

Addiction in the family: why a united approach matters, and why it is so hard

Addiction in the family rarely arrives quietly. It brings fear, money problems, broken trust and a steady stream of crises, and it often drives a wedge between the people who should be on the same side. One parent wants to hold firm, the other wants to help. One thinks the other is too soft, and the other thinks they are too harsh. Separated parents, step-parents and grandparents can find themselves in the same standoff.

When that happens, blame tends to move in. It turns up in three directions: at your child ("they are doing this to us"), at yourself ("where did I go wrong?") and at everyone else, from a partner or an ex-partner to the school or the system.

While blame is natural, it is also unhelpful. It leads to division rather than unity. And as the saying goes, "United we stand, divided we fall".

Understanding addiction and getting professional support

The first priority is to understand addiction. Not to manage your child, not to fix them, but to understand what is going on. Understanding is where everything begins.

Addiction changes the brain's reward, motivation and decision-making systems. That is why pleading, bargaining, logic and promises so often fail, and why an intelligent, loving person can keep making choices that look incomprehensible from the outside. It is not a character flaw, and it is not a reflection of how you raised them. Once you see this, a lot of what has been confusing begins to make sense, and a lot of the anger loses some of its fuel.

This is also where professional support earns its place. A specialist addiction clinician can explain how addiction works, help you think through your particular situation, and give you somewhere to take the questions you cannot answer at 2am. You do not need to wait for a crisis, and you do not need your child's agreement to get support for yourself.

Understanding enabling and setting boundaries with your adult child

Enabling is any act that cushions, mitigates or delays the consequences or hardship that are an essential part of reaching the point of being ready to change. The difficulty is that it rarely feels like enabling. It feels like love. It feels like keeping your child safe.

If you have been doing it, you are in very good company. Almost every parent has, because watching your child hurt (or being on the receiving end of their anger) is more painful than almost anything else a parent faces. It is human, and it comes from love, not weakness.

Boundaries are how you step out of the pattern. A boundary is not a punishment, and it is not an ultimatum. It is a clear statement of what you will and will not do, and it sits entirely inside your own control. You cannot control whether your child uses. You can decide what you will fund, what you will tolerate in your home, and how you will respond when the phone rings.

Looking after yourself when your adult child has an addiction

On every flight, the safety briefing tells you to fit your own oxygen mask before helping anyone else. It sounds selfish until you picture the alternative: a parent who passes out while trying to help their child is no use to anyone.

Parents of addicted adults often do the opposite. Sleep goes. Meals get skipped. Friends drift away because it is too hard to explain. Every day is organised around the phone and the next crisis. Eventually the stress becomes overwhelming, and the parent who was holding everything together falls apart.

Looking after yourself is not a reward for when things settle down. Things rarely settle down by themselves. It is how you stay well enough to be the steady person your family needs. That means the basics: decent sleep, regular food and water, some physical activity, time with people who care about you, and support of your own.

Managing fear, anger and distress as a parent

Even with understanding, boundaries and self-care, there will be moments when fear, rage or despair spikes. What you do in those moments matters. Reactions made in the heat of it are often the ones parents regret.

Learning and practising a robust set of evidence-based emotional regulation skills equips you with the ability to respond rather than react, and improves the quality of your life regardless of what is happening in it.

Support for parents: where the Above & Beyond Parents' Program fits

Everything in this article is a doorway. Understanding addiction, recognising enabling, setting boundaries, looking after yourself and steadying your emotions are each a subject in their own right. Reading about them is not the same as being able to do them at 2am, when the phone lights up and your heart is racing. The Above & Beyond Parents' Program has been precision engineered and methodically assembled to close that gap.

COMPLETING THE PROGRAM UNLOCKS:

The understanding to make better decisions.

The Program takes you well beyond the overview here. You'll learn how addiction really works in the brain, how to recognise enabling in all its disguises, where your power genuinely lies and where it doesn't, and how to set boundaries and communicate in ways that leave the door open. Better understanding leads to better decisions and better responses, and it puts you in the best position to avoid unknowingly delaying your child's path into treatment and recovery.

The tools to live alongside the situation, instead of being at its mercy.

Understanding only helps if you can use it when emotions are running high. The Program gives you established, evidence-based tools, drawn from approaches such as DBT, ACT and mindfulness, for the moments distress spikes, together with a simple daily practice of reflection and planning that builds your steadiness over time. You will never have the power to make the situation disappear, but you can unlock the ability to stop being completely entrenched in it.

You are not alone

The Program is built on partnership. We work alongside you, and you are supported throughout.

No program can promise your child's recovery, and ours doesn't. What it does is put you in the best possible position: informed, equipped and supported, whatever happens.

TALK TO US

Find out more about the Above & Beyond Parents' Program or book a consultation at **aboveandbeyondaddiction.co.nz/book**

NEED HELP NOW?

111 Emergency

1737 Free call or text, any time

0800 787 797 Alcohol & Drug Helpline (24/7)

0800 543 354 Lifeline Aotearoa