

It's Hard for Me Too

A self-help guide for family and friends living with the effects of drug or alcohol use.

VOCAL – Voice of Carers Across Lothian

Edinburgh Carers Hub, 60 Leith Walk
Edinburgh, EH6 5HB

VOCAL Carer Centre, 30/1 Hardengreen Estate,
Dalkeith, EH22 3NX

Scottish charity: SC020755
Company Registration: SC183050

First published in June 2004 by VOCAL
Reprinted September 2006
Reprinted August 2009
Reprinted February 2013
Reprinted June 2015
Revised and reprinted August 2020 & June 2021

© VOCAL 2021

No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the written permission of the publisher



HAPPY TO TRANSLATE

MOŻEMY PRZETŁUMACZYĆ আনন্দের সঙ্গে অনুবাদ করব

ترجمے کے لئے حاضر 很樂意翻譯 يسعدنا توفير الترجمة

Summary available in Braille, large print, easy read
and audio on request. Call 0131 622 6666.

Caring for someone affected by drug or alcohol use

Introduction

This booklet is written for people who are dealing with the effects of living with and caring for someone affected by drug or alcohol use. It might be your family member, brother, sister, child, parent, husband or wife, it might be your friend or partner. Living with someone who uses drugs or alcohol can be like living on a permanent rollercoaster. The emotional impact can be huge, distressing and confusing. This booklet will help you explore what is happening to you. It will also help you explore the impact and influence you can have on the life of the person you are concerned about.

We will give you a way of understanding the range of feelings you may be experiencing, help you identify the things that might help you and give you information on the places you can get support.

Family members and carers of people affected by drug and alcohol use say that at times, they feel overwhelmed by everything that is happening around them and that they can lose sight of who they are and what they need. This booklet may help you to find yourself again.

It isn't about how to stop someone using alcohol or drugs, it's about how their using affects you and how you can deal with some of the difficult and painful feelings.

How did it all start?

Finding out

How you entered this part of your life is often a moment that remains with you forever. It may have been that you had pushed the thought of someone you care about being involved with drugs or alcohol out of your mind for months before you let the thought in. Or maybe the person always used drugs or alcohol but the impact on your life changed. Maybe their usage increased and became a problem.

Your first response could have been anger or disbelief that this was happening to you. You didn't want your suspicions confirmed but here it is proving your worst fears right. Maybe you wanted to hurt the person you care for and protect them at the same time. You may try to minimise it or try to find reasons why it's OK. 'Everyone goes through this sort of phase', 'they are going through a difficult time', 'they will be OK when it gets better'.

Conflicting feelings

You may experience a range of feelings, some conflicting. You may be angry, frightened, sad or relieved. You may feel compelled to find out as much as you can about drugs and alcohol. On the other hand, you may feel frozen, unable to move and unable to acknowledge this new place in your life.

Your thoughts and feelings may change from day-to-day, hour-to-hour, moment by moment. You may feel as if your life is whirling out of control as you struggle to hold on to some sort of normality.

What's happening to me?

At one level, someone using drugs or alcohol in itself is not a problem, but it is when it starts to cause disruption to your life. Every aspect of your life can be affected. From the day-to-day practical details, through to your dreams for the future. And each change will bring with it an emotional response.

Changing the picture

As you see the person you care for changing so will your inner picture change. This is the picture we all keep inside ourselves, in our heads, to help us deal with the world and how our life will be. Really no one actually knows how their life will be or what will happen, but neither do we like not knowing what's going to happen. We can't live with that degree of uncertainty. In order to try and deal with some of that uncertainty we plan out how our lives will be: jobs, family, children, grandchildren, holidays or just a happy life. When something you don't like comes along in life, like illness, redundancy, debt or drugs, you have to find a place for it in your 'life picture'. If you have

a reasonably OK sort of picture that you are happy with, then you won't want anything difficult coming into it. Anything that seems to threaten the security of the picture will be pushed to one side. You try to 'keep it in the corner' and hope it will go away. It might do, however, it might get bigger and start to take over the picture.

You may start to resist it and try to force it out. You may try to force the person using the drugs or alcohol to change; it's their fault that this thing has intruded into your life. Then, as it begins to take over, you try to find reasons why it's there in the first place. Going over things that you could have done differently. As if by some magic process you could go back and change things. Make it different. Do something that will stop whatever it is you don't like from coming into your life. Unfortunately we can't. Accepting the difficulty is the first step towards dealing with it.

Acceptance

The battle within yourself to accept drugs or alcohol into your picture of life can go on for weeks, months or years. You may never reach that point of acceptance. However, accepting that they are there may be the only way that you can begin to deal with them and begin to build a new life picture, where you accommodate and control the effects of drugs and alcohol on your life, rather than them dominating it.

The journey towards acceptance is full of twists and turns, slippery slopes and high mountains, at each turn a welter of feelings and emotions to be dealt with. You don't have to deal with it on your own, there are agencies and people who can help, providing support and understanding.

Places of support are listed at the end of this booklet.

Call them, use them.

What sort of feelings do friends/family deal with?

There are many ups and downs for friends and family members. You can feel tired and worn down by the responsibilities of caring. You can do it willingly; you can feel it's your duty. You sometimes feel isolated within your communities. You feel that if only you could do more; be more patient; if you did something differently in the past; then life would be OK now.

You feel down about all the things you have to do, sad about lost dreams for your future and for the person with the addiction. You can feel angry at what is happening in your life. You can feel no one really understands; you can feel it's all your fault that you are in this situation. You are sometimes embarrassed or ashamed by how the person you care for behaves.

You love the person with the addiction and can feel compassion and sadness. You feel joy and happiness on the days when things are going well, and despair when they're not. You feel guilty when you feel angry or sad.

You sometimes feel you cannot go on and then fear what the future might bring if things change, wanting to hold on to the familiar even if it is almost too difficult.

You find out who are real friends. You discover strengths and abilities you never knew existed within yourself.

You all have different lives and similar feelings.

Dealing with feelings

Love and hate – conflicting feelings

One of the first things to be clear about is that it is normal to feel different things about the same person at the same time. For example, you might feel angry about the person's drug or alcohol use and you might also feel anxious about them. You might love them and long for the relationship you once had with them and at the same time loathe them and want to push them away. At times like this you might feel confused about why you feel like that, think that you are being hypocritical or being unclear about how you really feel. The reality is that most people feel conflicting feelings all the time. The only difference is that often, when in relation to those you feel strongest about, the feelings can seem extreme and this is what confuses and perplexes us.

Yes, you can love and loathe someone at the same time. When you hold both feelings together they become manageable. It's when you try to deny one or the other that it becomes difficult. Feelings try to compete for space with each other and you end up in an inner conflict over which feeling should be there rather than accepting that both are valid and that it's OK to feel both at once. Feeling bad about hating someone can lead you on to the next difficult feeling: guilt.

Why do I feel so guilty?

The first thing to realise about guilt is that it isn't really a feeling as such. It's really a response to 'wrongdoing' and comes directly before forgiveness. It's something that is there to stop us doing something. **It's not a punishment.**

Guilt is a natural response to us doing something wrong. You develop it as a small child. At the time when you learn about right and wrong. When you do something wrong you should feel guilt, a very nasty and unpleasant feeling, and this experience should stop you doing it again. Only what goes wrong is that you start to punish yourself for all the things you think you have done wrong. Notice, **not things that you have done wrong, things you think you have done wrong.** You imagine all sorts of things as wrongs and start to feel guilty about all sorts of things which, strictly speaking, are not wrongs at all.

You become judge, jury and jailer. You lock yourself in a prison of guilt for things you probably didn't do. Things like if you had done this, that or the other, they wouldn't have got involved with drink or drugs.

Now the problem here is that not only have you judged yourself guilty, you have also condemned yourself to a life of guilt, as you can do nothing to make the situation different. You have also allowed yourself to assume a position of being all-powerful in relation to the other person. You are saying that you and you alone could have stopped them. You don't give any space or thought or weight to the person themselves having a choice in this. You may or may not have had a role to play in their drug or alcohol use, however, you do not need to take on all the responsibility for it. They had a part to play as well and only they can resolve it.

So how can I deal with it?

To begin with, think about what you have actually done wrong. Now think about if they were really things that were wrong, would you end up in front of a judge for what you did? Or were

the things you feel you did maybe errors of judgement? Did you think at the time that what you were doing was OK? Did you plan for things to turn out like this?

Think now about someone whom you respect, someone whose opinion you value. Imagine telling them of the things you feel you did and imagine what their response would be. Would they condemn you in the way you condemn yourself? Would they be softer, more understanding, forgiving?

As mentioned previously, guilt comes before forgiveness. So, now you need to **forgive yourself for not being perfect**. Allow yourself to be human. Be kind to yourself. It may seem very simple and I can hear you saying it's not that simple. No it isn't, but it's a start.

How will that help me?

It means that you can start to deal with the feelings and thoughts rather than trying to avoid them. The other point about guilt is that it is something that stops us feeling other things. It's like a giant drainage cover that comes down to stop other feelings surfacing. Often these other feelings are things you don't want to feel and you certainly don't want other people to know about.

The feelings we try to avoid

Feelings like shame, disgust, anger and sadness. I am sure you can think of others.

No-one wants those they care about to be involved with drugs or alcohol to the extent that it damages and affects their lives.

You probably don't want the neighbours to know. It's hard not to feel a sense of disappointment or shame, feeling like you haven't got it right. You maybe think about what others think of you. You may want to hide it. You may want to pretend it's not happening to you.

Again, it goes back to checking if you have done the things you are ashamed of, actually beginning to check if it's you, or if it's the person you care for doing those things. Often you will find that it is the other person's behaviour that is causing the feelings in you. Them and the drugs or alcohol, and the games they play with you. Pushing you into being someone you don't really want to be.

Playing games

Earlier we looked at how each of us has a picture in our heads of how we want our life to be. The person you care for has their picture as well. Drugs and alcohol are likely to be central in their picture as well. Only their relationship with the drugs and alcohol is likely to be different to yours. The person you care for may 'love' the drugs and alcohol as much as you loath them. They may feel that the whole purpose of their life is bound up in satisfying their demands for more. They may feel desperate if they cannot find enough resources to 'feed' it and at times like these may have to pull someone else in to help them. That someone could be you. That's when the games begin as they have to 'persuade' you to join in that game of feeding the drugs and alcohol. Giving them what they feel they need and deserve.

They may have to put a bit of pressure on you to get you to join in.

They may have to lie, cheat, steal, threaten, manipulate and cajole you into doing what they want. They will do anything to get you to play. The problem is that this is a game you can never win and one in which the stakes continually increase. The more you give, the less likely you are to win. The games may vary from person to person and the rules may be slightly different, however, 'emotional blackmail' is in one form or another, universal.

The game of emotional blackmail

An example of the basics of the game. The person using the drugs or alcohol asks for money, you refuse, they demand and threaten. They don't see the unreasonableness of their request! They do not consider the bills you have to pay or the food you need to buy. All they see is their own need which you can satisfy. If you don't give them what they want then it's your fault they have to steal it from you. You had it and withheld it. It was your fault. You can never win this game.

The rules also suggest that if you don't do as required then the person using the drugs or alcohol will up the stakes to make you give them what they want. This includes threats of:

- violence
- theft
- self-harm
- promises to change

In the game of emotional blackmail the first three are likely to happen, the last is unlikely. Does this sound familiar?

Another common variation of the game is: Good Guy, Bad Guy. Imagine that you, the person you care for and the drugs and alcohol are points on a triangle, as in the diagram below.



Now in this game you have to remember that it is the person using drugs or alcohol who decides who will be in which position. They will usually assume the role of victim. Life is hard for them. If you do exactly what they want then usually they will put you in the Good Guy corner. You are OK and it's the drugs and alcohol that are evil and need to be beaten. The victim will promise that they will beat their addiction, they will overcome the drugs and alcohol who are seen as the Bad Guy.

You may feel a sense of unease in doing what they want you to do, however, you also want to believe them that they will change and that things will be different. **You comply and start the game.**

However, if you don't do what they require then they will switch you into the Bad Guy corner and you become the one who is frustrating them, causing them grief. They tell you that it's all

your fault and it's no wonder they use, they have to in order to cope with all the bad things you do to them. You are the Bad Guy and drugs and alcohol, (now the Good Guys), rescue them from you.

You had nothing to do with the change in roles. It was the victim who put you into the opposite corner. Now the problem here is that no-one really wants to be the Bad Guy. So, you can find yourself giving in and doing what's required because you don't want to be put into the Bad Guy corner.

What you need to accept at this point is that **you can never win this game**. The only way you can be the Good Guy is to do what they want. No matter what, the only positions for you in this game are uncomfortable, do as they want or be out. There is no way you can win. Recognising this is another step on the journey to reclaiming yourself.

Dealing with loss and fear

At some point, maybe when caught up in one of those games, or maybe in the middle of the night when you lie there wondering if all this will ever end, it dawns on you that the person you are dealing with now is no longer the person you once loved and cared about. They are someone different. This realisation may be sudden or it may be gradual. It can bring with it many feelings – sadness, anger, relief, fear.

Losing the person you care about and seeing them change into a different person, maybe someone who has values and attitudes alien to you, can be upsetting, difficult or freeing. No one person can say what that moment of change will mean for anybody else. You will have your own meaning for it along with

your own feelings. The sense of loss you feel may be sharp and painful. It can seem like a living loss. The person you loved is gone and yet a likeness to them is still there.

The person now in front of you may also be someone who leaves you feeling fear; for them and for yourself. You may not want to experience that degree of discomfort and try to think of them as they were, holding on to an idealised image of them and finding excuses for what they are doing now. These are all ways in which we try to deal with the conflicting feelings and emotions that confront us. None of them are wrong, they are just ways of coping with it all. It's for you to decide how you want to cope, no-one can tell you. Again, it may be helpful to talk to someone away from your family and friends about how you feel. Call one of the agencies listed at the back. Talk to them. It's what they are there for.

Sometimes the games come true

It's a sad fact that one day the threats may be true. Threats of violence may become violence and you may have to involve the police or other professionals. The threats of self-harm may result in the person you care for being admitted to a psychiatric hospital. Using drugs or alcohol may bring on, or make worse, mental health difficulties. They may commit suicide. There is no way anyone can predict what may happen. All that can be said is that these are very real possibilities.

Dealing with the fact that the person you care for could end up in prison, hospital, on the streets, involved in dealing or prostitution, or dead, are real. These are difficult and complex issues that you may want to talk through with someone now. Even if they are just thoughts at the back of your mind. Talking them through now could help. Details of organisations you

can contact are listed at the back of this booklet. **Call them, it could help.**

A word about dual diagnosis

Some people are given what is termed a 'dual diagnosis', that means they have both drug or alcohol use and a mental health difficulty. This means it can be difficult to decide if it's the drugs or alcohol causing the mental health difficulty or vice versa.

If the person you care for is given a dual diagnosis it is important that you find out what it means and how both conditions are to be treated. It's a complex situation so speak to one of the agencies listed at the back of this booklet for information and support.

Dilemmas and choices

There are no right or wrong ways of dealing with situations or feelings about caring for someone who uses drugs or alcohol. There are only choices of varying degrees of difficulty.

There are only continuing dilemmas which you have to manage and balance, taking into account the risks and possible consequences of any actions. No matter what other people say you should or should not do, what they would do in your situation, no-one but you can really decide. **You know how much you can deal with.**

For example, other people may tell you to be strong, say 'no', don't give in to them or throw them out. Yet could they do it to their son, daughter, partner or friend? Could they deal with the constant anxiety and worry about what might be happening to them? How do you refuse to give your son or daughter money when you know that they owe it to a dealer and if they don't pay they will end up in hospital? How do you not get someone a bottle of alcohol if you know that the price of not doing so will be an evening in which they physically, emotionally or verbally abuse you? There are no easy decisions, there are only choices which work for now. Being a carer is often about living with constant dilemmas and choices. What worked today may not work tomorrow.

What can you do?

The first thing you can do is acknowledge that the situation you are dealing with is difficult and complex, and whilst other people might have simple answers, they do not have to live it.

The only person who can decide what's right for you, is you. You have to decide what's right for you and choose, as far as you can, where the person you care for and their drug and alcohol usage is going to fit into your life picture.

Drugs and alcohol may or may not be a part of the life of the person you care about in the future. They may choose to come off them. However, that's their choice, not yours. Your choice has to be based on what you can control.

It's back to the life picture you had at the start. If you can accept that drugs and alcohol will at some level be a part of that picture, rather than trying to push them out, you can then decide where you want them to be. Remember the drugs and alcohol will try to dominate your picture so you may have to create a box, or some other sort of safe and secure place for them. Imagine where they are going to be. Will they be safe there? Can you hold that boundary and not let them dominate your life?

Do you have things, or maybe people, that you can call upon to help you if you feel yourself being taken over again? Holding those boundaries may take more strength than you have at times. You may not be able to stop playing the game all at once. Some days you may just play it and give in. It's OK, tomorrow is another day.

Don't do it on your own, call one of the agencies listed. Use them, ask them to help you, provide a bit of extra strength and energy. They know what it's like. Why try to go it alone if help is at hand? **Use them.**

You are the only person who can determine if the drug and alcohol use of the person you care about will dominate **your life**. In the same way that **they** are the only person who can determine if **they want to stop or not**. You cannot do that for them, neither can they stop the drugs or alcohol affecting you. You can each only take responsibility for your own lives.

How can I do it?

In tiny steps. No one thing will make life easier for you. Decide how you want your life picture to be. Accept that there may be other issues along the way, however, you need to start by looking at what you would like to change in your life now.

Reclaim it minute by minute, thought by thought, friend by friend.

Think about all the things the drugs or alcohol have 'stolen' from your life. Not just the actual things that have gone missing or the money, but things like peace of mind, security, friends, sleep, relaxation and fun. Think of something that you could reclaim. It could be something very small, think about it and then do something about getting it back into your life.

Holding onto bits of your old life or bringing them back into your life will be difficult. However, it's only by setting boundaries around parts of your life and protecting these that you can begin to rebuild something for yourself. This can help you start to take small steps forward. Don't feel down or put off when things start to get better they then slip backwards again. It often happens.

You probably won't be able to get all of your life back. Some bits will be lost, how you feel about things will have changed. You may find yourself being less judgemental about people's lives. You may find that you have changed and no longer have the same things in common with people you once felt close to. Friends may have deserted you, others may have provided huge amounts of support.

Living lives that involve drugs or alcohol, in whatever way they affect you, means that those lives are unlikely to be lived in straight lines. The person you care for may resolve to come off drugs or alcohol. They may go through rehab, be doing really well and you may feel life is getting back to normal and relax. Then the person starts using again and you are thrown back into the nightmare. It happens. Use what you've learnt from dealing with it before and find help and support for yourself. It's not a failure, it's part of the course. All you can do is start again, lay down the boundaries, decide where they will fit into your life and hold onto the things that you want to keep in your life.

At times you will feel that you have been to hell and back. You have and you have survived. You will probably not be able to get all your life as you want it. Who can? You may, though, be able to get some of it. Doing this and taking control of where you want drugs and alcohol to fit into your life and not allowing them to totally dominate won't necessarily make a difference to the person who is using. But it might. If they see you dealing with it, if you step back and stop supporting the drugs or alcohol, then they may be able to take responsibility for dealing with them as well. Hope for it, but don't rely on it.

Useful contacts

Family support:

VOCAL Family Support Addictions (Edinburgh)	0131 622 6666
VOCAL Family Support Addictions (Midlothian)	0131 663 6869
	vocal.org.uk
West Lothian Family Support Group	01506 430 225
Mid and East Lothian Drugs	07843 339958
	meld-drugs.org.uk
Edinburgh Young Carers' Project	0131 475 2322
(For under 18's)	youngcarers.org.uk
Al Anon (Alcohol)	0800 008 6811
Families Anonymous (Drugs and alcohol)	0207 498 4680
	famanon.org.uk
SFAD (Drugs and alcohol)	0808 010 1011
	sfad.org.uk

Counselling agencies:

Edinburgh and Lothian Council on Alcohol	0131 337 8188
Simpson House (Drugs)	0131 225 6028
	simpson-house.org
Gamcare (Gambling)	0808 802 0133
	gamcare.org.uk

24/7 helplines:

Drinkline (Alcohol)	0300 123 1110
Talk to Frank (Drugs)	0300 123 6600
	talktofrank.com





VOCAL Family Support Addictions supports family members, friends and carers of people affected by drugs or alcohol use in Edinburgh and Midlothian.

Edinburgh Carers' Hub

60 Leith Walk
Edinburgh EH6 5HB

☎ 0131 622 6666

@ centre@vocal.org.uk

Midlothian Carer Centre

30/1 Hardengreen Estate
Dalkeith EH22 3NX

☎ 0131 663 6869

@ midlothian@vocal.org.uk

vocal.org.uk

