

# 10 Things to Stop Doing If You Love an Alcoholic

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Are you wondering how you can cope with a drunk mother during the holidays, or how you can help her? Have friends told you that you are an enabler for your spouse? Do you find yourself suffering the consequences of a loved one's alcohol problem? It can be hard to hear that you need to change yourself when a loved one is living with alcoholism. After all, it's their problem, isn't it? Unfortunately, you can only change yourself, and the only way you can interrupt and change the current course of your interactions with people with substance abuse disorders is to change your reactions.

Those who live or have lived with active alcoholics or anyone struggling with addiction find that they have been deeply affected by the experience. Many times, the frustration and stress can be caused by your own actions and choices. By adjusting *your* approach and *your* attitude toward the problem, you can place it in a different perspective so that it no longer dominates your thoughts and your life. In some ways, knowing that you can change your approach and attitude is empowering. You no longer need to continue doing some of the things you do in your dance with a person with an addiction.

**Here are 10 things that you can stop doing that may help relieve the pressure.**

## 1 Blaming Yourself

It's typical for alcoholics to try to blame their drinking on circumstances or others around them, including those who are closest to them. It's common to hear an alcoholic say, "The only reason I drink is because you..."

Don't buy into it. If your loved one is truly an alcoholic, he is going to drink no matter what you do or say. It's not your fault. He has become dependent on alcohol, and nothing is going to get between him and his drug of choice.

## 2 Taking It Personally

When alcoholics promise they will never drink again, but a short time later they are back to drinking as much as always, it is easy for family members to take the broken promises and lies personally. You may tend to think, "If she really loves me, she wouldn't lie to me." But if she has become truly addicted to alcohol, her brain chemistry may have changed to the point that she is completely surprised by some of the choices she makes. She may not be in control of her own decision making.

## 3 Trying to Control It

Many family members of alcoholics naturally try everything they can think of to get their loved one to stop drinking. Unfortunately, this usually results in leaving the alcoholic's family members feeling lonely and frustrated. You may tell yourself that surely there is something that you can do, but the reality is that not even alcoholics can control their drinking, try as they may.

Even knowing that you may still want to help your addicted loved one when he is in the middle of a crisis. In reality, that is usually the time when the family *should* do nothing.

When an alcoholic or drug abuser reaches a crisis point, sometimes that's the time the person finally admits he has a problem and begins to reach out for help. But if friends or family members rush in and "rescue" the person from the crisis situation, it can delay the decision to get help.

## **Let a Crisis Happen**

For those who love an addict, it is *very* difficult to sit back and let the crisis play out to its fullest extent. When addicts reach the point in their substance abuse when they get a DUI, lose their job, or get thrown in jail, it is a difficult concept for their loved ones to accept that the best thing they can do in the situation is to do nothing. It seems to go against everything they believe. Unfortunately, this causes the cycle to repeat...indefinitely.

You don't have to create a crisis, but learning detachment will help you allow a crisis—one that may be the only way to create change—happen.

## **4 Trying to Cure It**

Make no mistake about it, alcoholism, or alcohol dependence, is a primary, chronic, and progressive disease that sometimes can be fatal. You are not a healthcare professional, and even if you are, you should not carry the responsibility for treating friends or family members. You are not a trained substance-abuse counselor, and again, even if you are, your role should not be a counselor. You just happen to love someone who is probably going to need professional treatment to get healthy again. That's the alcoholic's responsibility, not yours. You can't cure a disease. No matter what your background happens to be, you need outside help.

Alcoholics usually go through a few stages before they are ready to make a change. Until an alcoholic begins to *contemplate* quitting, any actions you take to "help" her quit will often be met with resistance.

Even though it is not your responsibility to "cure" your loved one's alcoholism, you may be interested in knowing some of the things that make drinkers want to stop, as well as some of the things which get in the way of an alcoholic getting sober. You may wish to consider a family intervention. Before looking into ways of staging an intervention, take a moment to read further about how to care for yourself—not only for yourself but because it's often the only way a person with an addiction will get the help they need.

## **5 Covering It Up**

There is a joke in recovery circles about an alcoholic in denial who screams, "I don't have a problem, so don't tell anyone!" Alcoholics typically do not want anyone to know the level of their alcohol consumption because if someone found out the full extent of the problem, they might try to help. If family members try to "help" (enable the alcoholic) by covering up for their drinking and making excuses for her, they are playing right into the alcoholic's denial game. Dealing with the problem openly and honestly is the best approach.

## **6 Accepting Unacceptable Behavior**

Accepting unacceptable behavior usually begins with some small incident that family members brush off with, "They just had too much to drink." But the next time, the behavior may get a little worse and then even worse. You slowly begin to accept more and more unacceptable behavior. Before you realize it, you can find yourself in a full-blown abusive relationship.

Abuse is never acceptable. You do not have to accept unacceptable behavior in your life. You do have choices.

It's important to protect your children from unacceptable behavior as well. Do not tolerate any hurtful or negative comments addressed towards your children. These comments can result in lasting damage to a child's psyche. Protect your children, and don't hesitate to keep your child away from someone who drinks and does not respect your boundaries. Growing up in an alcoholic home can leave lasting scars.

## **7 Having Unreasonable Expectations**

One problem of dealing with an alcoholic is that what might seem like a reasonable expectation in some circumstances, might be totally unreasonable with an addict. When alcoholics swear to you and to themselves that they will never touch another drop, you might naturally expect that they are sincere and they won't drink again. But with alcoholics, that expectation turns out to be unreasonable. Is it reasonable to expect someone to be honest with you when the person is incapable of even being honest with himself or herself?

## 8 Living in the Past

The key to dealing with alcoholism in the family is staying focused on the situation as it exists today. Alcoholism is a progressive disease. It doesn't reach a certain level and remain there for very long; it continues to get worse until the alcoholic seeks help. You can't allow the disappointments and mistakes of the past to affect your choices today because circumstances have probably changed.

## 9 Enabling

Often, well-meaning loved ones, in trying to "help," will actually do something that enables alcoholics to continue along their destructive paths. Find out what enabling is and make sure that you are not doing anything that bolsters the alcoholic's denial or prevents them from facing the **natural consequences** of their actions. Many an alcoholic has finally reached out for help when they realized their enabling system was no longer in place. Take a moment to take this quiz to see if you are enabling an alcoholic.

What happens when you enable an alcoholic? The exact answer depends on the specific situation, but what usually happens is that:

- The alcoholic never feels the pain
- It takes the focus off of the alcoholic's behavior

For example, if your loved one passes out in the yard, and you carefully help him into the house and into bed, only you feel the pain. The focus then becomes what you did—moved him—rather than what he did, which is passing out. If in this situation, he wakes up on the lawn in the morning with neighbors peeking out the window, and comes into the house while you and the children are happily eating breakfast, he is left to face the pain. The only thing left for him to face is his own behavior. In other words, his behavior, rather than your reaction to his behavior, becomes the focus. It is only when he experiences his own pain that he will feel a need to change.

Natural consequences may mean that you refuse to spend any time with the alcoholic. This is not being mean or unkind to the alcoholic, but instead is being protective of yourself. It is not your job to "cure" your loved one's alcoholism, but allowing natural consequences to occur is one factor which can push a person from the pre-contemplative stage to contemplative stage of overcoming addiction. The contemplative stage ends with the decision to make a change, yet further steps such as preparation, action, and later maintenance and likely relapse are usually needed before the addiction is controlled.

## 10 Putting off Getting Help

After years of covering up for the alcoholic and not talking about "the problem" outside the family, it may seem daunting to reach out for help from a support group, such as Al-Anon Family Groups. But millions have found solutions that lead to serenity inside those meetings. Going to an Al-Anon meeting is one of those things that once you do it, you say, "I should have done this years ago."

## Guaranteed Prescription for Recovery

The July 2013 issue of the "DMC Campfire" newsletter featured an article aimed at the families of addicts entitled, "How Can I Help?" The article included what DMC calls a "Guaranteed Prescription for Recovery. Things you can start doing to help your loved one."

The following suggestions have been adapted from Dunklin's prescription for recovery. Although they are aimed at Christian families struggling with addiction, the principles can be applied by everyone:

Healing yourself involves being able to say several things including:

- You no longer have to deny the presence of addiction in your family.
- You no longer have to control the addict's using.
- You no longer have to rescue the addict.
- You no longer have to be interested in the addict's reasons for using.
- You no longer have to accept or extract promises.
- You no longer have to seek advice from the ill-informed.
- You no longer have to nag, preach, coax, or gesture.
- You no longer need to allow the addict to abuse you or your children.
- You no longer have to be a victim of addiction.

## **Look After Yourself**

There may be very little you can do to help the alcoholic until he or she is ready to get help, but you can stop letting someone's drinking problem dominate your thoughts and your life. It's okay to make choices that are good for your own physical and mental health.

Sources:

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