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Addiction Medicine & Psychiatry



Partners of Drug Addicts/Alcoholics Also Need Help

Many spouses or lovers are caught in a chronic cycle of unsatisfactory relationships. Their problem may be that they repeatedly fall in love or get involved with alcoholics or other addicts even though they have sworn that “I won’t let this happen to me, ever again.”

The good news is that the “victims” in such relationships can interrupt their involvement in these self-defeating cycles. How? By gaining an intellectual/emotional understanding of the problem – usually through Al-Anon and therapy – which will help them change their own behavior patterns. The psychological hitch is that they have to give up the illusory benefits such as ennobling victimhood, suffering martyrdom, the feeling that they are maintaining control of the addict, etc.

Drugs are not your problem.

“I became involved with a man who was a drug addict,” writes a woman who is now sadder and wiser. “At first I thought he just liked using drugs. It wasn’t until I was deeply in love with him that I realized the magnitude of the problem. As time went on, the things that I found frustrating about his behavior turned out to be my reasons for staying in the relationship: I saw his disease as a challenge; I was determined to fix his (our?) problem.

“When I discovered that some of his bizarre, unkind behaviors might be caused by his drug use, I began to pull back emotionally. He didn’t seem to understand why I reacted that way. I didn’t know at that time that the brain effect suffered by people who are chronically loaded is that they don’t ‘comprehend;’ that the chemicals alter their brain function, i.e. their judgment and behavior.

“Through therapy, some unflattering aspects about my own behavior became clear to me: I was staying in this relationship not just because I loved him, but because of my own need. Trying to help him get over

his drug addiction made me feel both needed and strong. Some of my friends called my efforts noble. (I ignored those who called it stupid.)

“It was only after he started drinking heavily – he had gradually become ‘cross-addicted’ to alcohol – that I began to change some of my own behaviors. My old pattern was to tell him ‘I’m sorry, I just can’t see you today’ – but then make up some phony excuse and see him anyway. Gradually, I became more aware and honest about what I was really feeling; it was the opposite of how I was acting and what I was saying. With this new insight, I was able to be clear and direct with him. I learned to say ‘I can’t see you today because you’ve been drinking.’”

Your attitudes are your problem.

“My psychiatrist assured me that was a step in the right direction. But I continued, from time to time, to fall into my old behavior pattern of pretending and complying – and lying to myself – just to avoid making a scene or provoke his anger and risk losing him.

“Through therapy, I came to see my ‘mistakes.’ In Al-Anon I learned about co-dependent relapses (“he has alcohol slips, and you have attitude slips,” I was told); and in therapy, with the help of direct questions and cross talk – which are never done in 12-Step work – I learned to become accountable for my behavior.

“Progress was slow because he never went to 12-Step meetings or therapy with me. I continued to make his drinking the focus of bitter arguments. After one of these fights, I resolved that in the future I would explain my position and my feelings to him only when he was not drinking or using drugs. Predictably, we saw each other less and less. But even when we did see each other, we argued because sometimes I’d get so angry I couldn’t remember my own resolve.

“Today, I know that when alcoholics or drug addicts

are loaded, they are neurochemically/emotionally out of control. At such times, your (co-dependent) willingness to 'talk' is useless because the addict's receiver (the brain) is broken or turned off; and there are no voice mails. That means you're having a monologue. What I didn't know is that clinically, even though the addict's verbal skills are not impaired until late in the disease, their logical thinking and short-term memory are impaired early in the disease. That's why out-of-control alcoholics/addicts seem to talk a good game, but not make any sense; and, because of their blackouts, they often can't remember what they said - or what you said.

"In spite of my repeated efforts, my drug addict/alcoholic never did accept help for our problem. We have since parted ways. As for my own pathology, I now see the difference between FEELING strong and BEING strong. I was probably as sick as he was - but in different ways."

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