



How to Support a Loved One with Mental Health or Substance Use Challenges

A practical guide for family members, friends, and community supporters

When someone you love is living with a mental health or substance use challenge, it can be difficult to know what to say. You may feel worried, frustrated, frightened, or unsure whether you should step in. The most helpful place to begin is often simple. Let them know that you care, and that you have noticed they may be struggling. Also, it's important to let them know they do not have to face everything alone. You do not need to have the perfect answer or solve the problem yourself. A calm and steady presence can reduce isolation and make it easier for someone to consider help.

What to look for

Changes may appear gradually or all at once. A loved one may

- withdraw from family or community,
- sleep much more or less than usual,
- miss responsibilities,
- lose interest in activities,
- seem unusually fearful or confused,
- speak with hopelessness, or
- use alcohol or other substances more often.

These changes do not always mean that a person has a specific condition. They are an invitation to pay attention, remain curious, and ask how the person is doing rather than making assumptions about what is wrong.

Making space for an honest conversation

Choose a private, calm time when neither of you is rushed. You might begin by saying, "I've noticed you haven't seemed like yourself lately, and I care about you." Speak about what you have observed rather than criticizing the person's character or choices.

Words that Can Help

Open questions such as "How have things been for you?" or "What feels hardest right now?" give the person room to describe the experience in their own words.

Try to listen more than you speak. You can reflect on what you hear, thank the person for trusting you, and allow quiet moments without rushing to fill them. Advice may feel like pressure when someone is not yet ready for it, so ask, "Would you like me to listen, or would it help to think about options together?" Avoid labels, blame, lectures, and arguments about whether the problem is serious enough. Even when you disagree with a decision, you can still communicate respect for the person.

Words that Can Help

"I'm here with you." "You are not a burden."
"We can take the next step together." "What has helped you feel grounded before?"

Helping without taking over

Recovery is personal, and people are more likely to accept support when they retain voice and choice. Ask what kind of help would feel useful. The next step might be locating a counselor, treatment program, peer specialist, primary care provider, traditional healer, cultural support, support group, or trusted Elder. You might offer to make a call, arrange transportation, attend an appointment, or help with childcare. If the person is not ready, let them know the invitation remains open unless there is an immediate safety concern.

Healing may include professional care as well as the relationships and traditions that give life meaning. Ask what the person wants included. Connection to family, community, language, ceremony, spirituality, land, movement, art, or other sources of belonging may restore hope. Notice strengths and small steps, not only setbacks. A difficult day does not erase progress, and a return to substance use does not mean recovery is no longer possible.

When safety becomes the priority

If you are worried about suicide or serious harm, ask clearly: "Are you thinking about suicide?" or "Are you worried you may hurt yourself or someone else?" Asking directly does not place the idea in someone's mind. If there is immediate danger, violence, severe injury, or the person cannot remain safe, call 911 or go to the nearest emergency department. Stay nearby if it is safe.

For emotional distress, suicidal thoughts, or concern about a loved one, call or text 988 or visit [988lifeline.org](https://www.988lifeline.org). It is available 24 hours a day, and you may call someone else. If you suspect an opioid overdose, give naloxone if available and call 911. Keep the person awake and breathing, if possible, place them on their side, and remain until help arrives. If you are unsure, treat the situation as an overdose.

Caring for yourself is part of supporting them

Loving someone does not require accepting unsafe or harmful behavior, providing money that may be used for substances, hiding consequences, making excuses, or being available at all hours. Boundaries are not a withdrawal of love; they are a way to protect your own well-being while remaining supportive. This might mean offering groceries instead of cash, refusing to lie or cover for someone, ending a conversation when behavior becomes threatening or disrespectful, or setting limits on when and how you can help. Healthy boundaries are clear, consistent, and focused on what you will do rather than trying to control another person. You can care deeply, encourage treatment and recovery, and offer meaningful support while still protecting your safety, finances, relationships, and emotional well-being.

Words that Can Help

"I love you, and I cannot be around you when you threaten me. I can help you call for support."

Speak with someone you trust, seek a family or peer-support group, rest, and continue the practices that keep you well. You deserve support too.