

Taking the Lid Off



For young people living with someone's
excessive drinking, drug use or addiction

When your mum, dad, or other family member has been drinking or using drugs, do they:

Embarrass you?

Break promises?

Behave in confusing and unpredictable ways?

Then this booklet may help

We know how hard it is to have a normal life when you're worried about your family member drinking too much or using drugs.

You probably are worried about your family.

- ❖ *You never are sure what to expect next.*
- ❖ *There may be arguments.*
- ❖ *Your parents might not remember what they said or did when they were drunk or high.*
- ❖ *You may be feeling you have to look after them.*
- ❖ *You may be ashamed or embarrassed to have friends over.*

You are not alone.

You probably know other young people with the same problem. You just don't realize it because it's so hard to talk about.

That is why this booklet was written. To help give you ideas and information that will help in what can be a difficult situation.

It is not all the information you will need. But it is a start.

What is in this booklet?

- ❖ Understanding addiction
- ❖ How young people are affected
- ❖ What helps
- ❖ Where to get help

Four million people are addicted to alcohol and drugs across England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Considering how common alcohol and drug problems are, you can be sure that you are not alone!

How are young people affected by addiction?

Living with someone's addiction is a lot of pressure. If one of your parents or other family member has a problem with alcohol or drugs you may:

- ❖ Feel panicky, confused, mixed up.
- ❖ Bottle up what you are feeling.
- ❖ Struggle with school work because of worry or being tired.
- ❖ Try to hide it from your friends.
- ❖ Feel angry and upset at the way they behave, especially when you have been let down or have promises broken.
- ❖ Feel helpless and angry at yourself because you can't change things.
- ❖ Worst of all, you may even feel guilty that somehow you are to blame.

It is hard to cope with all the difficult feelings.

- ❖ You may try to keep things going at home by doing things yourself like house work, shopping or looking after younger brothers and sisters.
- ❖ Perhaps you have tried protecting the person drinking by hiding it from relatives, neighbours, or school.
- ❖ Some people pretend the problem will go away or that it doesn't exist.

How do people cope with all this pressure?

There is no rule book for living with someone's addiction. People cope the best they can. Unhelpful rules can develop in families where there is addiction.

- ❖ Don't talk – people don't want to upset other people
- ❖ Don't feel – people don't talk about feelings and tend to bottle them up
- ❖ Don't trust – broken promises mean trust is just not there

People take on roles to help them cope

- ❖ The hero – they try to keep things "normal and look after everyone else
- ❖ The mascot – they try to keep things light through humour
- ❖ The scapegoat – they get into trouble as a cry for help or because they are so angry

What makes it hard for young people is these rules and roles don't really help. They just add more pressure.



Understanding Addiction

No one really knows why a person develops an addiction to alcohol or drugs.

But what is addiction?

Addiction is when someone continues doing something, like drinking or using drugs despite the harm it is doing to them or their family.

When a person becomes addicted to the alcohol or other drugs their brain and body changes. Once they start to use, they can't stop. That is addiction.

There is nothing you can do to make your parent or family member stop drinking or using drugs.

Sometimes, kids think that if they empty their parent's bottles of alcohol or flush the drugs down the toilet, the family member will stop drinking or using. But they will just go out and get more.

If they can't seem to stop it does not mean they do not care about you. It means they have a serious problem.

They may need to get help from someone whose job it is to help people get better from addiction.

You can't control addiction or cure it. You certainly did not cause it. At the same time there are things you can do to make life better for you.



Addiction

**You didn't cause it,
You cannot cure it,
You can't control it,
But**

You can take better care of yourself

What can you do when you are affected by someone's drinking or drug use?

There are things you can do to keep yourself safe and help with all the stress and worry. These include:

- ❖ Remember you are never to blame for your parent's or family member's drinking or drug use. You are not responsible for them and what they do.
- ❖ Have fun. Do things other young people do.
- ❖ Get involved in activities outside the home like church, school or community activities.
- ❖ Everyone needs help from others sometimes. Develop good support and a back-up plan for crises. If things get hard, look for help. There are phone numbers and websites on the back page.
- ❖ If you are asked to keep secrets or do something you think is wrong, then it is time to tell a responsible adult.
- ❖ It helps to talk. People living with stressful situations, including addiction find it helps to talk with someone who understands the issues.
- ❖ Even though it might seem easier and safer to keep things to yourself, what hurts is keeping all those tough feelings locked inside you.
- ❖ Talking it through can help you make sense of what you are experiencing, examine the ways you are coping and learn new ways of coping.
- ❖ If your family member continues to drink or use drugs, don't lecture, especially when they have been drinking or using drugs.



There may be calmer times when it is possible to talk about how their drinking or drug use is upsetting you. This might help them feel it is time to get help. Then again it may not.

Some of the things we've talked about in this booklet may sound familiar. Remember:

You aren't alone.

Talk about it.

It's not your fault.

It's ok to love the person,
but hate the problem

Your parents or family member may love you, but they have a problem. The best way you can help them is to help yourself.

If your family member is in treatment

If your family member does seek help, that can be good news. It is a start. It can mean your family member can break free of addiction.

Treatment may involve seeing a professional, residential treatment or being involved with self help groups like AA.

You may see your family member's efforts to be more responsible, change and not drink or use drugs.

All you can do is support their efforts. You can not make those changes for them. If you have been worrying and looking after them, it can be a "challenge" to let go of that role and let them look after themselves.

If they do ask how their misuse of alcohol or drugs has affected you, tell them. This is an opportunity for them to learn how their addiction has affected those close to them. Try to be as honest and as open as you can be.

If someone starts drinking or using drugs again don't be discouraged. While it does happen, it is also an opportunity for them to learn from their mistake and try again.

Looking after yourself

You often hear this advice to people under stress: look after yourself. There are things you can do to improve your sense of well being. Eat well, exercise, do enjoyable things. Most of all value and look after yourself.

EMERGENCY PLANS

If your parent has a problem with drugs or alcohol, it helps to have a plan ready in case of emergencies. If you think about this ahead of time, you will be ready if you find yourself in an uncomfortable situation.

- ❖ Make sure you know how to call the police, fire department, ambulance service, and doctor. Make sure your brothers and sisters know too.
- ❖ Make sure you always have extra money for a phone call, or your phone charged in case it is too dangerous to drive home with a parent who is drunk or high.
- ❖ Make up a list of safe places to call for help, or to stay. Maybe a grandparent, older brother or sister, aunt, uncle, neighbour, or friend. Memorize their phone numbers, and call them if it looks like the situation in your own home might get out of control.
- ❖ If you need to study for exams or course work, ask a friend you trust or relative if you can spend some time there, where it is quieter.
- ❖ If you want to talk to your mum or dad about the alcohol or drugs, do it when you feel safe, and when your parent has not been drinking or using drugs.

If you are nervous about talking with an adult about what is happening with your parents, ask a friend who knows the situation if you can practice with them, to help work out ahead of time what you are going to say.

A word about addiction in families

Addiction to alcohol can run in families. There is some evidence it can be genetic. Be careful with alcohol yourself. Avoid drinking heavily or using it to solve problems.



The important thing to remember is that you are not alone. Help is available. You can talk to:

- ❖ Contact Youth (Chill) 028 90 320092
- ❖ Opportunity Youth 028 90 435810
- ❖ Childline 0800 1111
- ❖ Your school counselor, pastoral care teacher



A directory of where to get help can be found at www.edact.org.

If you want to read more about addiction, how it affects families and what helps, the booklet *Taking the Lid Off, A Resource for Adults and Young People* can be downloaded at the above address in the local resources section.

Other useful websites are
www.al-anon.org
www.nar-anon.org
www.drugsalcohol.info

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