It’s hard for me too

Information and advice for people affected by a family member or friend’s alcohol or drug use

VOCAL - Voice of Carers Across Lothian

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Please contact us if you have any communication needs or would like to see this information in a different format.

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HAPPY TO TRANSLATE
MOŻEMY PRZETŁUMACZYĆ আনন্দের সঙ্গে অনুবাদ করব
يسعدنا توفير الترجمة 很樂意翻譯 ترجمے کے لئے حاضر

CARER POSITIVE Employer in Scotland EXEMPLARY
LGBT CHARTER SILVER
TRUSTED STANDARD LEVEL 2 NCVO
LIVING WAGE EMPLOYER

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Introduction

Who this booklet is for

This booklet is for anyone who supports someone who uses drugs or alcohol. We refer to the person you support as your 'family member', but it could be anyone including your:

- Child
- Parent
- Partner
- Sibling
- Other family member
- Friend
- Neighbour

The emotional impact of looking after someone who uses drugs or alcohol can be huge, and it may change over time.

You can come back to this booklet any time you need emotional support. You can use it at any stage of your family member's journey with alcohol or drugs (beginning, recovery, relapse).

Your caring role

Many people who support someone who uses alcohol or drugs may not identify with the word 'carer'.

Maybe you have never thought about it before. Maybe you see this care as a normal, expected part of your relationship with that person.

At VOCAL, we see you as an unpaid carer who goes beyond the standard expectations of care for someone in their life.

You might support your family member or friend by:

- Giving them emotional support
- Ordering or collecting medication for them
- Doing their food shopping
- Taking them to appointments

It's important to recognise that they rely on your help. And giving this help affects you, too.

Substance use and mental health

For many people who use alcohol or drugs, it's common to face a mental health condition, too. Mental illness can make people behave in ways they otherwise wouldn't – meaning they may need more help from you. Such as:

- Self-isolation: They might need more emotional support.
- Psychosis: More likely to lose some contact with reality, so they might need emotional support from you, and help to access treatment.
- Depression: Less able to look after their own hygiene or basic needs, so they rely on you.

Behaviours like these can make your caring role more stressful, as there is a wide range of support that your family member needs from you. It can be hard to manage this responsibility if you are not completely comfortable with the position it puts you in.

Feelings you might have

Being involved with someone else's drug or alcohol use can bring a range of feelings. It's normal for your feelings to change over time, or for you to feel more than one thing at once.

It's okay to have conflicting feelings, such as:

- Love for the person, and anger towards them for their behaviour.
- Relief that you know about their alcohol or drug use, but worry about what this means for the future.
- Loss for the person who has changed, and acceptance of the new person in front of you.
- Hope that their behaviour or habits will soon change, and fear that they won't.

Shock

Whether the person you support gradually increased their use of alcohol or drugs, or it was a sudden change, finding out can be a big shock.

People may respond differently to finding out that someone they are close to is using drugs or alcohol.

Some might want to ignore the problem. If you hope that the increased alcohol or drug use is temporary, it can be easy to think things like:

- "They're just going through a hard time right now."
- "Everyone has a phase like this."
- "This problem will sort itself out."

On the other hand, some people might want to 'fix' the situation by asserting control over someone else's behaviour. No matter how you first responded, it can be hard to accept that drug or alcohol use is part of your life. You didn't plan for this and it is negatively impacting you.

Give yourself time to get used to this new information. If you would like to talk about it, try contacting one of the support organisations listed at the back of this booklet.

Worry, stress or fear

Once you know that the person you support uses alcohol or drugs, it's normal to worry about how this could impact their physical and mental health, or put them in potentially dangerous situations.

Your concern for them can feel overwhelming. You want to protect them from the harms of drugs or alcohol, but you can't control someone else's behaviour.

You may be thinking things like:

- “What if they don’t come home tonight?”
- “What do I do?” (if you are faced with a difficult situation, such as finding drugs in their possession)
- “I wish they would be more honest with me…”

Try to take a step back and see how much this stress is impacting your life. Do you find it hard to sleep? Are you often distracted at work? Is it worrying to receive phone calls, as you think it could be an emergency?

It’s understandable that you fear for the health and safety of your family member. However, coping with this high level of stress over a long period of time is not manageable. In some cases, it can lead to burnout.

It’s important to take time for yourself and maintain your own routines. Even little things can help – more on this in the **What can you do?** section.

Guilt

When thinking about the person you care for, has this sometimes led you to imagine alternative versions of their life or yours?

What if I had done something different? What if they had never been to that event, or met that person?

These “What if?” thoughts are very common. But if they go on for a long time, they might lead you to a downwards spiral where you may start to blame yourself for someone else’s actions.

Guilt is a natural emotional response to doing something wrong – but in caring for someone who uses alcohol or drugs, it’s unlikely that you have done anything wrong.

Look as objectively as possible at your actions and those of the person you are supporting. Did you do anything wrong? If you were talking to a friend in your situation, would you give them more compassion than you give yourself?

It’s important to remember that, while alcohol or drug dependence can cause physical health problems or psychological challenges, your family member is responsible for taking their first steps towards recovery.

You can support them through the process, but you can’t control their behaviour or their decisions. Don’t blame yourself for what they do.

Sadness and loss

As well as the grief we feel when someone dies, there are other types of loss we can experience while someone is still living. When looking after someone who uses alcohol or drugs, this might be:

- Sadness for your family member when they're not doing well, especially if their alcohol or drug use overlaps with a mental health condition.
- Mourning the person they might have been, or the different life they could have had.
- Grief for yourself too, and how your life might have been different if you had not taken on this role.
- Sadness for the relationship you used to have with them, and how it has changed.
- Isolation within your communities if the people around you have not experienced anything similar or don't talk about it.

It can be difficult to continue spending time with your family member through this period of their life. As they change, you might try to hold on to an idealised version of them in your head, and feel disappointed that this is no longer real.

Allow yourself to feel sad. Grief can come in many forms, all of which are okay.

Anger

When in a close relationship with someone who uses alcohol or drugs, there are a few things that might make you feel angry.

Maybe you feel that it's unfair, as you wouldn't have chosen to be in this situation. Feeling overwhelmed by your caring responsibilities might lead to resentment towards the person you support.

Due to the influence of drugs or alcohol, they may behave in an irresponsible or intimidating way towards you and others.

This can be scary and you might wonder, “Why me?”.

It’s often difficult to separate the actions of the person themselves, and their actions due to alcohol or drug use or a mental health condition. It can be upsetting that your efforts to look after your family member are sometimes met with unfair, rude or aggressive behaviour.

If you feel angry about your caring situation, think of other ways you could release this anger. Maybe through meditation, counselling, exercise, or speaking to a close friend?

Shame and stigma

Sadly, there is a lot of stigma around the use of alcohol or drugs. This can come from:

- Lack of understanding of why someone might struggle with alcohol or drug use.
- Cultural or family context where people disapprove of alcohol or drug use.
- No recognition that a previously casual drug or alcohol habit has become a more serious health condition where the person is dependent on the substance.

- Judgement or misunderstanding of certain mental health conditions, which the person using alcohol or drugs may also experience.

Being close to someone using alcohol or drugs will give you a deeper understanding of why they do so, and how it impacts them. This empathy is an important part of your caring role, not to be overlooked.

But it can also be tiring to fight back against the stigma that you both may face. In some cases, it can be a barrier to accessing support.

Not everyone will respond to this stigma in the same way. Many carers feel ashamed and don't want other people around them to know. It can sometimes feel easier to ignore or hide what's happening, or even push people away.

The support organisations listed at the back of this booklet can help you cope with these feelings of shame. It's a normal experience and talking openly about it can help you let go of some the stigma.

Situations you might face

Emotional manipulation

If the person you care for starts to use alcohol or drugs more often, this can lead to emotionally stressful situations. If they feel desperate to meet their need for the substance, they might prioritise this above all else.

They may pressure you into helping them access more alcohol or drugs – or even steal from, lie to, or manipulate you. Unfortunately, in this game, the stakes will keep increasing and you will never win.

The game might follow this format:

1. The person using drugs or alcohol asks for money.
2. You refuse.
3. They demand it.

In this scenario, they don't see that their request is unreasonable, or consider your financial situation. All they see is their own need which they believe you can satisfy.

Threats

If you don't give them what they want, they might blame you for withholding it. They might raise the stakes by threatening you with:

- Violence
- Theft
- Self-harm
- Suicide

They may also promise to change, though this is less common than the more negative threats.

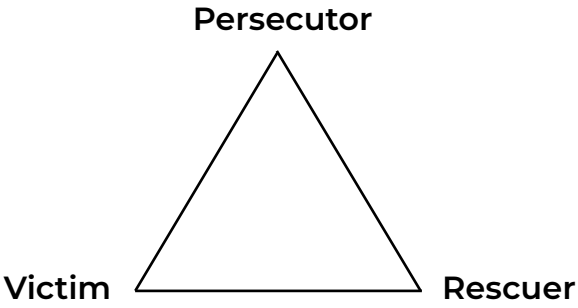
These are unpredictable but very real possibilities. You may have to seek medical assistance or involve the police or other professionals. Using drugs or alcohol may cause or worsen your family member's mental health difficulties.

Thinking about any of these threats coming true can be very scary. If you need to talk about it, check out one of the helplines listed at the back of this booklet.

The drama triangle

This is a concept in psychology, used to describe the roles we can play during conflicts. It was created by psychiatrist Stephen Karpman in 1968.

In situations between you and the person using alcohol or drugs, you can both move around between the three roles. We don't always play the same role.



Persecutors might:

- Be inflexible, and not tolerate others' behaviour.
- Blame or accuse the other person.
- Be angry and sometimes aggressive.
- Criticise and judge others.
- Feel superior to others.

Rescuers might:

- Try to help others, especially the victim, even when it isn't necessary.
- Crave feeling needed by someone.
- Not allow someone to help or think for themselves.
- Find it hard to say no.

Victims might:

- Feel powerless or helpless.
- Have low self-esteem and feelings of self-pity.
- Avoid confrontation.
- Feel embarrassed or ashamed.

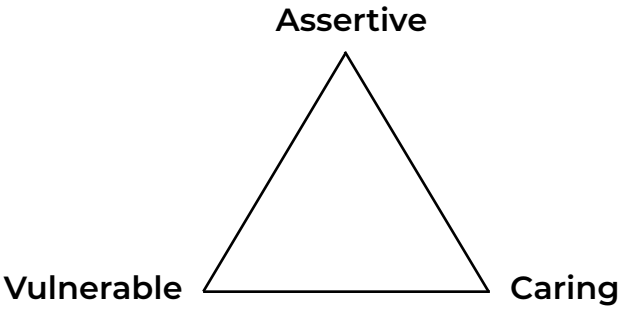
The dynamic between you and the person you care for may change over time. Sometimes they might be the persecutor and you are the victim, or sometimes it could be the opposite. Other times you might be the rescuer and they are the victim.

What you can do

The winner's triangle

It can be easy to get stuck in a cycle of conflict, as each role in the drama triangle depends on the others. If you recognise this pattern in your interactions with your family member, you can try to move to the winner's triangle instead.

Psychologist Acey Choy developed the winner's triangle in 1990, as a response to Karpman's drama triangle.



In each role, a person can use healthier, more positive communication to break the cycle of the drama triangle.

A persecutor can become assertive by:

- Knowing your own wants and needs, and expressing these clearly.
- Not judging others.
- Recognising that other people's needs are also important.

A rescuer can become caring by:

- Asking others if they need or want help.
- Respecting other people's autonomy.
- Listening to others and providing emotional support if needed.

A victim can become vulnerable by:

- Expressing your own feelings honestly.
- Asking for help when you need it, and accepting it when it's offered.
- Accepting yourself and your ability to meet your own needs.

Making time for yourself

Since taking on the role of carer for someone who uses alcohol or drugs, this may start taking up more of your time. Although it can feel difficult at first, bringing back time for yourself can help reduce your stress.

Think about what you have lost since you started looking after this person. As well as belongings or money, this could be:

- Friendships and community
- Relaxation and sleep
- Fun
- Security

Start small in thinking about how to get these things back. Maybe you could:

- Contact an old friend.
- Block out some time this week for your hobbies or some downtime.
- Adjust your phone settings to reduce non-urgent calls or notifications.
- Try out a new social group or volunteering opportunity.

If your feelings about your old pastimes and friendships have changed, that's okay. Try to focus on the people and things you do want to keep in your life. And if you have to let others go, that can free up some time for new opportunities.

Setting boundaries

A boundary is a limit on what we think is acceptable or reasonable behaviour.

To protect your own wellbeing, it's crucial to set boundaries on how much your family member's alcohol or drug use will impact your life. For example, you could tell them not to:

- Borrow or take your money to pay for alcohol or drugs.
- Contact you outside of certain hours each day.
- Use drugs or alcohol in your family home.
- Use alcohol or drugs in front of other family members.

When speaking to your family member about this, think back to the drama triangle and the winner's triangle. Try to be assertive by speaking honestly and directly, and using 'I' statements: "I feel [emotion] when you [behaviour]."

Boundaries are not just about requesting a change from someone else, and standing up for how you want to be treated. It's also important that you follow through on actions to maintain these boundaries if they are challenged or ignored. For example, if someone takes money from you, you might insist on repayment or contact the police. Or if they contact you outside of your set hours, you can choose not to answer.

It may sometimes be too hard to keep your boundaries, and you may get pulled back into emotional games. Remind yourself that it can take time to make progress, and tomorrow is another day.

Visualising

Another way to reduce the impact of drugs and alcohol on your life is to visualise it. Try thinking of the impact as a box that you set aside in your mind, and only open when you really need to.

This may not always be easy. Maybe you need to open the box less if your family member is doing well in recovery, but more if they relapse.

Instead of punishing yourself when this happens, come back to your boundaries, wellbeing routines or visualisation.

Taking control of where drugs and alcohol fit into your life, without allowing them to totally dominate it, won't necessarily make a difference to the person who is using drugs or alcohol.

But it might. If they see you step back and stop supporting the drugs or alcohol, then they may be able to take responsibility for dealing with them as well. You can hope for this, but don't rely on it.

Useful contacts

VOCAL: Voice of Carers Across Lothian

We support unpaid carers in Edinburgh and Midlothian through one-to-one advice, counselling, peer support, free events and activities, access to short breaks, and more.

Our Family Support: Drugs and Alcohol (FSDA) service helps carers of someone who uses alcohol or drugs.

Visit **vocal.org.uk/fsda** or use the contact details at the front of this booklet.

Other local organisations

You can also access a range of services from other organisations in Edinburgh and the Lothians which support carers of someone who uses alcohol or drugs.

CrossReach

- Charis House, 47 Milton Road East, Edinburgh, EH15 2SR
- 0131 657 2000
- info@crossreach.org.uk
- crossreach.org.uk

CrossReach counselling service

- Simpson House, 52 Queen Street, Edinburgh, EH2 3NS
- simpsonhouse@crossreach.org.uk

Edinburgh Young Carers

- Norton Park, 57 Albion Road, Edinburgh, EH7 5QY
- 0131 475 2322
- info@youngcarers.org.uk
- youngcarers.org.uk

ELCA (Edinburgh and Lothian Council on Alcohol)

- 91 Rose Street, Edinburgh, EH2 3DT
- 0131 337 8188
- elca@btconnect.com

Midlothian family support group

- 2-weekly meetings: No. 11 Recovery Hub, Dalkeith, EH22 1AL
- 07845 557 503
- S27and@hotmail.com
- facebook.com/midlothianfsg

SFAD (Scottish Families Affected by Alcohol and Drugs)

- Robertson House, 152 Bath Street, Glasgow, G2 4TB
- 0808 0101 011
- helpline@sfad.org.uk
- sfad.org.uk

West Lothian: Whole Family Support Service

- 47 West Main Street, Broxburn, EH52 5RL
- 01506 855 244
- wfss@westlothian.gov.uk
- westlothianhscp.org.uk

National helplines

For quicker or online-only access to support, you can try one of these national helplines.

Al Anon UK (alcohol)

- 0800 0086 811
- helpline@al-anonuk.org.uk
- al-anonuk.org.uk

Drinkline (alcohol)

- 0800 7314 314 (weekdays 9am–8pm, weekends 11am–4pm)
- contact@drinkaware.co.uk
- drinkaware.co.uk

Families Anonymous (drugs)

- 0207 4984 680
- office@famanon.org.uk
- famanon.org.uk

FRANK (drugs)

- Call 0300 123 6600 (open 24/7)
- Text 82111
- frank@talktofrank.com
- talktofrank.com