

Caregivers and Substance Abuse: Get the Help You Deserve

Caring for a friend or family member can create a wonderful sense of purpose and fulfillment.

But here's another truth: Carrying that kind of responsibility — especially if you don't have a good caregiving team or support network — can also become both emotionally and physically overwhelming. The ongoing stress can drive some caregivers to use and abuse substances.

If you find yourself relying on drugs or alcohol, or even questioning your use of substances to any degree, please continue reading. Sometimes caregivers need to receive care as much as they provide it. This could be one of those times for you, and the help you need is just a conversation or phone call away.

Don't Wait — Seek Help Now

As you've maybe heard before, the first step to any type of substance abuse or addiction recovery is to recognize that you have an issue. Remember: Self-awareness is honorable. It is extremely difficult to solve substance abuse issues by yourself, so seek help.

Talk to a trusted doctor or health care provider, or a sympathetic friend or family member about your concerns. Nervous? That's natural. Just be honest about your struggles. For example, if you're concerned about your alcohol consumption, try saying something like, "This is really difficult for me to talk about, but I feel like I'm drinking more than I should be. Can I tell you about it?"

Then, rest assured that you can get help. The American Psychiatric Association assures people that effective treatments are available for addiction, especially when medical professionals are involved. Your doctor can give you a formal assessment of your symptoms. They can also connect you with someone who specializes in helping people who struggle with alcohol or drugs. If treatment is recommended, it will most likely include several approaches, including therapy, outpatient programs, support groups and perhaps medication.

If you're more comfortable talking to someone anonymously, you can also call the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) national helpline. They offer free, confidential treatment referrals around the clock: 1-800-622-HELP.

Turn to Other Stress Relievers

Although they in no way replace doctor-prescribed treatment plans, alternative coping mechanisms may be helpful when it comes to managing stress. Helpguide.org, a non-profit mental health and wellness information website that reaches more than 35 million people annually, encourages people to try these stress-relief strategies, most of which are relatively easy to incorporate into your role as a caregiver:

- ✓ **Get moving:** Walk around the block a few times, do some jumping jacks, go outside and pull weeds, or do whatever you can to activate your body.
- ✓ **Try an online yoga class or meditate at home.**
- ✓ **Tap into the power of Mother Nature.** Breathe in fresh air. Look up at the sky through a window. Sit on a park bench with the person under your care and simply be still.
- ✓ **Delight your sense of smell.** Helpguide.org suggests breathing in the scent of fresh flowers, coffee beans “or savor a scent that reminds you of a favorite vacation, such as sunscreen or a seashell.”
- ✓ **Mentally go to your “happy place.”** Is it the tree swing you enjoyed as a child? The memory of your son saying his wedding vows? Close your eyes and let your mind wander backward to a moment that brought you peace and joy.
- ✓ **Pamper yourself.** Pampering doesn’t have to mean a full day at the spa. Treat yourself to dinner delivery. Enjoy a long bath. Watch a few episodes of your favorite Netflix show back to back.

Be Proud of Yourself

Your awareness of your relationship to alcohol and/or drugs is something you should be extremely proud of.

Remember: Self-awareness is one of the most powerful tools in keeping ourselves healthy and happy – and as a caregiver, health and happiness is definitely something you deserve.

Sources:

What is addiction?

<https://www.psychiatry.org/patients-families/addiction/what-is-addiction>

SAMSA (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration)

<https://www.samhsa.gov/find-help/national-helpline>

Stress symptoms, signs, and causes

<https://www.helpguide.org/articles/stress/stress-symptoms-signs-and-causes.htm>

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