

When Your Partner Has a Drug or Alcohol Problem

A Guide for Gay and Bisexual Men



It's tough enough when a friend has a problem with drugs or alcohol. It's even more complicated when your partner does. It's simply harder to see things objectively or to separate yourself from the effect of your partner's addiction when you're so emotionally, physically, and often financially intertwined. He needs help, and you need help. So who's left to help the relationship? *Can we both get through this together?*

This article offers some insight and advice on how to support your partner, yourself, and your relationship through this difficult period. Perhaps it will also validate your own experiences and even offer some hope. Before going further, however, it may be useful to read *When Your Friend Has a Drug or Alcohol Problem* for an overview of addiction, the recovery process, and effective helping strategies.

The course of addiction on relationships

Although every intimate relationship is certainly unique, predictable patterns often emerge when addiction joins the partnership. **As addiction develops and evolves, most couples experience parallel changes in how their relationship feels and functions.** The common progression looks something like this:

● Explanations

Early in the development of the addiction, **you and your partner explain away his occasional episodes of excessive drug use or drinking.** You may attribute them to unusual stress at work or a birthday celebration gone too far, for example. Although the events come and go, your anger, embarrassment, or disappointment may start to build up.

● Doubt and distrust

Soon you realize that your partner's drug use/drinking is not normal, and **you begin to pressure him to be more careful, cut down, or quit.** This can be especially difficult if you both drank or used drugs together, you now stop, but your partner doesn't. In

this case, your partner might see the problem not as his own substance abuse but as your sudden attitude reversal towards this once shared activity. Regardless, you now become the bad guy or the nagging mother in the relationship.

At the same time, **you try to hide his problem from the outside and keep up a good front,** which can become exhausting over time. You may notice more negative emotions creeping in. *Where is he? He's hungover and now I have to do all the yard work. What is he doing all night? I hate that I don't believe him.* As resentment and distrust emerge, so too might the apologies and promises not to let it happen again. You forgive again because you love him.

● Crisis

Now **you can no longer pretend everything is OK, and you spend much of the time going from crisis to crisis.** Life seems quiet for a while. Then all of

a sudden - another binge, another chunk of money gone, another 3-day disappearance, another lie that's backfired. The emotional roller coaster consumes your energy. You may feel helpless and unable to control the emotional or practical chaos of your own house-

"Prepare for nothing to happen right away. After I confronted my partner and he promised to work on his drug use, I got my hopes up. Then the bubble burst. He kept using and nothing happened. I realized that my main goal was just to get it off my chest. I let him know I was hip to what was going on. I was available when he was ready to talk."

hold. At this point, you might start seeking outside help.

Sex can become a central and divisive issue, particularly when crystal meth is involved. A common scenario goes like this: Your sex life starts to shrivel up, he starts having sex outside the relationship or going beyond the agreements in your “open” relationship. You may feel ignored sexually or even feel manipulated if your partner uses sex to “make up” for something he’s done or to prove he loves you even though he’s acting like an ass. Ultimately, sex can become something to avoid, withhold, or use as emotional leverage.

Infidelity fueled by addiction can stir a variety of responses including “retaliatory” sex. *If he can do it, I can do it too. I’m owed something.* Trying to get back at him or get him to “wake up” by fucking other men may feel empowering at first, but it’s likely to only deepen the distrust and make the situation worse. It’s best to find less inflammatory ways to take care of your sexual needs.

If you’re worried that his sexual activity might bring home HIV or an STD, start insisting on condoms, having less anal sex and getting tested more frequently. **Many men take greater sexual risks when under the influence,** so your concerns are certainly valid. Do what you need to protect yourself.

● Coming to terms

Your coping abilities eventually become stronger and now you clearly see the addiction. You gradually assume a larger share of the responsibility for the home, friend/family commitments, and taking care of your own needs. You become more resilient to his lies and denial and less guilty for not getting pulled into them.

This period sometimes becomes the “ultimatum phase.” You want to help, you want to stick by him, but you can’t do it unconditionally. Many partners set new limits (or at least stop adjusting old ones) and begin to envision a possible change or end to the relationship.

● Disentangling

At this point, the “we” evolves into “you and me” as **you begin to see yourself more separately from your partner or his addiction.** Many turn to counseling, with or without their partners, in attempts to either arrest the addiction or deal with its consequences. It may be useful to work with a counselor with specialized experience in addiction and for each partner to see his own therapist outside of couples counseling.

Should I leave? becomes a common question here. *How long do I try and how far do I go to help until I just can’t anymore?* Clearly, the answer is different in each relationship, but there are two situations in which you should strongly consider separation, even if only temporarily:

1. Your partner’s addiction is making you sick as well and you are no longer the person you used to be. Perhaps you see yourself more depressed, withdrawn from friends, not doing the fun hobbies you used to, or having problems at work because you’re so distracted.
2. Your own financial, physical, or legal security is in jeopardy. Physical or sexual violence should never be tolerated.

Addiction can have catastrophic legal and financial consequences. Watch out for

deep trouble spots and take steps to protect yourself as much as possible. Distancing yourself can be tricky, of course, if you co-own a house, bank account, or other assets, but it is even more critical in these cases. Co-ownership is also an emotional symbol of trust and commitment in most relationships. Talk to a legal or financial professional for objective advice.

Some men feel a lot of social pressure to stay in a relationship. They don’t want to appear too “heartless,” or they worry what friends might say if they jump ship too soon. And what do you do about all the friends you and your partner share? What if you adore his family and they adore you? This is where **trusting your instincts is important.**

“I knew deep down that things were in trouble. I could sense it, feel it in the air. But I questioned my instincts because I was afraid of rocking the boat and turning my partner away. When I went with my gut feeling, it helped me prepare a plan for getting through it.”

