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If nothing ever changed, there would be no butterflies.

Top 10 Survival Tips For Loving an Addicted Person

1. Come face-to-face with reality.

Learning how to deal with reality is the most important first step in “surviving” when you love an addicted person. Although it may seem easier to stay in the “fantasy space” where you can continue to believe that things are going to magically get better, there is no such magic. Things will not get better just because you wish they would.

Coming face-to-face with reality means accepting that parts of your life may be out of control as a result of loving someone who is engaging in addictive behaviours. These addictions can include mind-altering substances such as drugs and alcohol, as well as mood-altering addictions such as eating disorders, compulsive over-spending, smoking, being “glued” to the internet, gambling or codependency in relationships.

You may be feeling a constant, gnawing worry that you live with every day. You may find yourself being asked for money often, and feeling guilty if you say no. Perhaps you are watching everything you say and do, in order to “keep peace” in your home and not make the addict angry. Or you may be asked to do favours for the addict on a consistent basis, such as watching their children or doing their errands, and you may not know how to say no.

Whatever your particular situation is, acceptance of what you are dealing with in your life is the first survival tip for loving an addicted person.

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2. Discover how to love an addicted person -- and stay healthy.

There are effective ways to deal with the addicted person in your life, just as there are ways that are not only ineffective but can also be dangerous. Learning to distinguish between them can save you a lot of time and can also produce much healthier results for you and your addicted loved one.

For example, learning how to set and maintain appropriate boundaries is a very important skill. You may need to explore the reasons why you have a problem doing that, and then learn some assertiveness techniques that will help you say “yes” when you mean yes, and “no” when you mean no.

Another way to keep yourself healthy while caring about an addicted person is to make sure you are looking after your own life and keeping a good balance with such things as work or volunteering, supportive friendships, fitness and good nutrition, and time for the fun activities that you enjoy.

Choose to practice the healthier ways of loving your addicted person.

3. You cannot control or “fix” another person, so stop trying!

The only person you have any control over is yourself. You do not have control over anything the addicted person does. Many people choose not to believe this, but that doesn't make it any less true. Once you can really grasp the reality of this concept and live by it, your life will become much easier.

The Serenity Prayer can give you a helpful gauge to see whether you are trying to control people and situations that you simply cannot control.

God, Grant me the Serenity
To accept the things I cannot change,
The courage to change the things I can,
And the wisdom to know the difference.

Cultivate your wisdom, so that you know the difference between what you can and can't change, and stop trying to control or “fix” anyone other than yourself.

4. Stop blaming the other person and become willing to look at yourself.

As easy and tempting as it may be for you to blame the addict in your life for your struggles and suffering, there is actually more value in exploring what you may be contributing to this situation, since that is the only thing you can really do anything about.

Even though the addict has undoubtedly contributed his or her share of the trouble, in some way you also have a part to play in what is going on. For example, you might be keeping the “drama” going by lending money to your addicted loved one. Or perhaps you are always willing to be there to listen when they tell you all about the problems they are encountering as consequences of their addictive behaviours.

These kinds of actions on your part will not help your loved one in the long run. It is your responsibility to recognize and “own” your unhelpful behaviours, and to get professional help in doing this if necessary.

Understanding why you choose to behave in unhealthy ways is the key to making a change. Become courageous enough to be willing to look at yourself.

5. Learn the difference between “helping” and “enabling.”

Just like most people, you might think that you need to help your addicted loved one. You probably fear that if you don’t provide help, he or she will end up in a worse predicament. When you try to “help” addicts by giving them money, allowing them to stay in your home, buying food for them on a regular basis, driving them places or going back on the healthy boundaries you have already set with them, you are actually engaging in “rescuing” behaviours that are not really helpful. Another term for this kind of unhealthy helping is “enabling.”

When you can be as truthful as possible with yourself about your own enabling behaviours, you can begin to make different choices. This will lead to healthier changes in your addicted loved one as well. For example, you might decide to tell the addict in your life that you will no longer listen to them complain about their lives. However, you can let them know that you are very willing to be there for them as soon as they are ready to work on resolving their problems.

Once you stop your enabling behaviours, you can then begin to truly help your loved one.

6. Don't give in to manipulation.

It has been said that the least favourite word for an addict to hear is "No." When addicts are not ready to change, they become master manipulators in order to keep the addiction going. Their fear of stopping is so great that they will do just about anything to keep from having to be honest with themselves. Some of these manipulations include lying, cheating, blaming, raging and guilt-tripping others, as well as becoming depressed or developing other kinds of emotional or physical illnesses.

The more you allow yourself to be manipulated by the addict, the more manipulative the addict is likely to become. When you hold your ground and refuse to give into their unreasonable demands, they will eventually realize that they are not going to get their way.

Saying "no" is an important first step toward change -- for you, as well as for the addict.

7. Ask yourself the "Magic Question."

It is important to understand that you might be just as "addicted" to your enabling behaviours as the addict in your life is to his or her manipulations.

In the same way that addicts use drugs, alcohol and other addictive behaviours to avoid dealing with their shame about feeling unworthy and unlovable, you may be focusing on the addict's behaviour in order to avoid having to focus on living your own life. Your enabling behaviours toward the addict may be helping to keep you busy and to fill up your life so that you don't have to see how lonely and empty you are feeling inside.

Ask yourself the question "How would my life be better if I wasn't consumed by behaviours that enable my loved one?" Allow yourself to answer honestly, and be aware of any feelings that come up.

Although it may be scary to think about giving up behaviours that have formed your "comfort zone," it may be even more scary for you to think about continuing them.

8. Know that “Self-care” does not equal “selfish.”

Too many people get these two ideas confused: they think that if they practice healthy self-care and put themselves first, they are being selfish. “Selfishness” basically means that you want what you want when you want it, and you are willing to step on whomever you have to in order to get it. That actually sounds more like the behaviour of the addict. If you try to take care of someone else before taking care of yourself, you will simply become depleted and exhausted.

“Self-caring” means that you respect yourself enough to take good care of yourself in healthy and holistic ways such as making sure your physical, mental, emotional and spiritual needs are met.

As an adult, it is your job to determine what your needs are, and you are the only one responsible for meeting them.

9. Rebuild your own life.

The best way to come out of your own “addictive behaviours,” such as enabling and people-pleasing, is to focus on your own life. If your life seems empty in any areas such as career, relationships or self-care, begin to rebuild your life by exploring the kinds of things that might fulfill you. Would you like to make a career change or go back to school? Perhaps you would like to develop different hobbies or activities that would help you meet new people.

Rebuilding your life so that you feel a greater sense of happiness and self-fulfillment is your most important over-all responsibility. Enjoy!

10. Don't wait until the situation is really bad ~ reach out for help NOW!!

When those who love people with any type of addictive behaviour finally reach out for help, they have usually been dealing with their situation for a long time. If you have been waiting to see whether things would get better without professional help, please consider getting help NOW, before things become even worse.

If this situation is just beginning for you, it is best to get some support as soon as possible, so that you don't make the mistakes that could make things more difficult.

The sooner you reach out for help, the better it is for everyone concerned.

ABOUT CANDACE

Candace Plattor, M.A., R.C.C., is a therapist in private practice, specializing in addictive behaviours such as substance misuse, eating disorders, gambling, internet addiction, overspending and codependency in relationships.

Candace offers individual and couple counselling. She also counsels family and friends whose loved ones are struggling with addiction, helping them to set appropriate boundaries and put more attention on their own lives.

Candace's therapy services are provided in her Vancouver, BC office, as well as by telephone for those who are unable to come to her office.

Contact Candace at 604.677.5876 to set up a FREE 15-minute telephone consultation or email her at candace@candaceplattor.com.

You can also sign up for her newsletter and receive her free report, "7 Tips to Outsmarting Your Addiction" by visiting her website at <http://www.candaceplattor.com>

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