

# STEPWISE RECOVERY

## The Family Disease

Understanding How Addiction Affects the Whole Family

*This guide is for anyone whose life has been touched by someone else's addiction — partners, parents, children, siblings, and friends. You deserve support too.*

*This resource is produced by Stepwise Recovery and is not affiliated with any Twelve Step fellowship.*

### Why We Call It a Family Disease

When someone is struggling with addiction, the effects ripple outward into every relationship. Family members and close friends often develop their own patterns of distress, anxiety, and coping behaviours that can persist long after the person in their life enters recovery — or even if they never do.

This is not because family members have done anything wrong. It is because human beings are deeply affected by the suffering of people they love.

### Common Emotional Responses

If you recognise yourself in any of the following, you are not alone:

- Constant worry about what might happen next
- Anger at the person using, followed by guilt for feeling angry
- Shame and reluctance to talk about what is happening at home
- Exhaustion from trying to manage or fix the situation
- Loss of trust — in the person using and in yourself
- Grief for the relationship or person you feel you have lost
- Fear for the safety of your children or yourself
- Feeling responsible for causing or not preventing the addiction

### Common Behavioural Patterns

Over time, family members often develop survival strategies that can become harmful:

#### Enabling

Making excuses, covering up, lending money, or removing consequences. Enabling comes from love and fear, but it can allow the addiction to continue unchallenged.

#### Controlling

Monitoring, searching, hiding substances, setting rigid rules. Whilst understandable, these efforts rarely stop the using and often increase tension.

## Withdrawing

Emotionally shutting down, avoiding conflict, becoming invisible. This is a protective response, but it leads to isolation and suppressed emotions.

## Over-Functioning

Taking on all household responsibilities, parenting alone, managing finances for two. This pattern leads to burnout and resentment.

## The Impact on Children

Children living with a parent's addiction are affected in specific and significant ways:

- Take on adult responsibilities far too early
- Become hypervigilant, always watching for signs of trouble
- Suppress their own needs to avoid adding to family stress
- Feel responsible for the parent's using or emotions
- Struggle with trust and attachment in their own relationships
- Experience anxiety, depression, or behavioural difficulties

### **Children need to hear three things clearly and repeatedly:**

*It is not your fault. You did not cause it. You cannot fix it. And you are loved.*

## Finding Your Own Recovery

Family members deserve their own support, regardless of whether the person they love enters recovery:

- Al-Anon and Nar-Anon — Twelve Step fellowships for families and friends
- Family therapy with a professional who understands addiction
- Individual counselling to process your own experiences
- Setting healthy boundaries — learning what you can and cannot control
- Connecting with others who understand your situation

## Self-Reflection for Family Members

### 1. How has your loved one's addiction affected your daily life?

### 2. What coping behaviours have you developed? Are they helping or harming you?

### 3. When did you last do something purely for your own wellbeing?

**4. What boundaries would you like to set but feel unable to?**

**5. What support would help you most right now?**

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*You cannot love someone into recovery. But you can love yourself enough to seek your own healing.  
That is not selfish — it is necessary.*

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**UK Crisis Support**

Samaritans: 116 123 | FRANK: 0300 123 6600 | NA UK: 0300 999 1212 | SHOUT: Text 85258

Al-Anon UK: 0800 0086 811