

What's a substance use disorder?

A substance use disorder (SUD) is a **medical condition** that can result from using a particular substance, such as alcohol, opioids, cannabis, or cocaine. People with an SUD usually have the following four traits:

- They can't control their substance use.
- They continue to use despite knowing it's harmful.
- They spend a lot of time using and recovering from use.
- They have powerful cravings to use.

How can something like substance use be a medical condition?

Many people can choose to use a substance occasionally, or even regularly, without any problems. But **choosing** to use a substance is different from feeling like you **must** use it. This feeling is the core of addiction.

Substance use can have a long-term effect on the brain because of the way our nervous systems respond to **pleasure**. Alcohol and drugs cause the brain to release **dopamine**, which makes us feel good. Over time, these repeated releases of dopamine can cause the nervous system to be **hijacked**, and the brain starts behaving as though the substance is **necessary for survival**. When this happens to someone, they have developed an SUD.

I'm angry at them.

It makes complete sense to be angry if your loved one has said or done things that have hurt you or broken your trust, and it doesn't help to pretend that things are okay if they're not. On the contrary, it might be **helpful** for your loved one to learn about the ways in which their behaviour has been harmful to you – it provides them with incentive to keep working on their recovery.

Forgiveness doesn't happen overnight. Once your loved one is in treatment and is getting better, you can start working on **reconnecting** and **rebuilding trust**.



How can I learn more?

If you have any questions about substance use disorders, you should speak to a health care professional. You can also find more information and resources online at

www.metaphi.ca/patient-resources.html

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Substance use disorders: A guide for families

Most of us have known someone who has had a **substance use disorder**, which is **problematic use of alcohol or drugs**. Watching someone you care about do things that are harmful to them can make you feel sad, helpless, and angry. **You can't make someone else get better** from a substance use disorder, but the more you learn about it, the better equipped you are to help them – and help yourself.

This pamphlet contains information about what a substance use disorder is, why some people develop it, and what you should do if you think someone you love has it.

Why do people develop SUDs?

There are many reasons why one person might develop an SUD while another doesn't. People who experienced **trauma** during their childhood are at greater risk for addiction, as are people with a **family history** of addiction. It's important to know that **SUDs are not related to character, will power, or morals, and have nothing to do with the kind of person someone is.**



Does this mean they're not responsible for their actions?

No, it doesn't. It's not a person's **fault** that they have an SUD, but they sometimes do bad things **because of it**. When someone learns they have an SUD, **it is their responsibility to get help**. This can be a very hard thing to do, particularly if the person believes, as many people do, that they should be able to do it on their own by "just stopping". But like other illnesses such as diabetes and depression, SUDs are caused by biological, psychological, and social factors, and just like these other illnesses, they are very hard to manage without help. Realizing this is the first – and often the hardest – step towards recovery.

How do they get better?

There are several types of SUD treatment. **Withdrawal management, anti-craving medication, counselling, and peer support**

have all been found to work well. When your loved one is ready, they might want to visit a rapid access addiction clinic to discuss their options. There's a list of clinics online at www.metaphi.ca/raam-clinics. They don't need an appointment – they can just show up during clinic hours with their health card.

How do I talk to them without ruining our relationship?

Expressing concern about a loved one's substance use can feel like a big risk. Before you talk to them, there are a couple of things you should consider:

Am I the right person? The nature of your relationship will affect how they respond. The message needs to come from someone that the person deeply trusts.

Is it the right time? It's not a good idea to have this conversation with your loved one while they're intoxicated, stressed, rushed, or angry. Wait until you can talk without any external pressures getting in the way.

What do I say?

1. Ask. Open the conversation by asking them about their substance use. Find out how they perceive it and feel about it. Ask them what it gives them and what it costs them.

2. Empathize. Tell them you care about them and you're worried. Give a specific example of negative consequences stemming from

their use, and ask them how it made them feel.

3. Normalize. Let them know that SUDs are very common and is not their fault. Reassure them that people do get better.

4. Offer options. Tell them that SUD treatment is safe and effective, and give them some resources to look at when they're alone (you can find some at www.metaphi.ca/patient-resources.html). Give them time to think – ultimatums are likely to make them feel threatened and trapped. Tell them you'll be there if and when they're ready to talk.

How can I get support?

You need support too. Here are some resources for support groups, counselling, and education for families:

- Al-Anon (www.al-anon.org)
- Canadian Mental Health Association (www.cmha.ca)
- Psychology today (www.psychologytoday.com)
- ConnexOntario (www.connexontario.ca)
- Families for Addiction Recovery (www.farcana.org)
- The Sashbear Foundation Family Connections program (sashbear.org/en/family-connections)
- Family Association for Mental Health Everywhere (www.fameforfamilies.com)

