

FACT SHEET

FAMILIES, SIGNIFICANT OTHERS AND ALCOHOL AND OTHER DRUG USE

Risky alcohol and other drug (AOD) use is widely accepted as causing stress to not only the individual using drugs but to family members and “significant others”: friends, colleagues.

- Families affected by AOD problems may experience similar difficulties to families experiencing distress from a significant other's mental or physical illness.
- It is well documented that families affected by serious AOD problems can experience relationship conflicts and misunderstandings, a rearrangement of family roles and heightened anxiety in all family members.
- Much of the anxiety associated with being a family member impacted by a significant other's AOD use has to do with the uncertainty and unpredictability of the person's mood and behaviour.
- Many of the coping strategies used by families can be seen as normal reactions to stressful and often traumatic events or circumstances caused by the problematic AOD use.

COMMON REACTIONS

Family members experience a range of emotions when they realise that a family member or significant other is dependent on AOD. Initially they may experience shock and disbelief. Grief and fear are also very intense and common reactions.

Other common reactions can include:

- Feeling stressed;
- Anxiety;
- Confusion;
- Depression;
- Helplessness;
- Low self-esteem;
- Despair;
- Sense of loss of control;
- Loss of trust;
- Anger; and/or,
- Guilt.



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The effect of the drug use can put the very integrity of the family at risk.

Families may even be in greater crisis than the person using AOD.

Additionally, if a family member is using drugs and has no intention of stopping, family members often feel alienated, ashamed and powerless and may become socially isolated.

STAGES THAT FAMILY MEMBERS GO THROUGH

It has been documented that family members often go through a number of stages as they try to support and help the significant other whose drug use has become problematic. It is not uncommon for many to say that they feel that they have tried everything, and that nothing seems to work.

- In the first instance they may try and find an acceptable explanation for the problematic AOD use and initially tolerate the behaviour, provide support, avoid confrontation, assume some of the significant other's responsibilities and "lighten their load" all in the hope that the drug use will cease.
- Inadvertently this approach may provide more space and opportunity for the person to continue their AOD use.
- When this approach is not successful, there may be an attempt to control the AOD use by actions such as disposing of the alcohol or other drugs, restricting money where possible, making threats and punishing the significant other who is using drugs.
- These responses can lead to anger and frustration on the part of the family member using drugs and as a consequence their drinking or drug use may go "underground".
- As the AOD use continues there is a growing acceptance by the family or significant others that these strategies may not be working; and,
- Shame can lead family or significant others to attempt to cover up the AOD use behaviour. This may lead to periods of extended social isolation.



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FAMILIES HAVE NEEDS IN THEIR OWN RIGHT

AOD use issues can put extreme pressure on family members and on their relationships with each other and the person who is experiencing difficulties with their drug use.

Families and significant others do the best they can in very difficult situations.

SHAME AND STIGMA

- Family members often ask themselves “what did we do wrong?” This feeling of blame and guilt is often amplified by stigma and discrimination in the community.
- Stigma and discrimination affects not just the person using drugs but family members as well.
- Feeling ashamed can prevent family members from reaching out to others – not just other family members, but friends and even professionals for help.

Fact Sheet AOD use
stigma and
discrimination

WHY IS COUNSELLING HELPFUL?

Without the involvement of family and significant others, it is easy to focus on the individual using drugs in isolation from their family and broader social circumstances. However, family and friends of people with AOD problems can benefit from support and counselling as they are at risk of stress related physical and psychological disorders.

- Appropriate family support can reduce the impact and harm for family members and improve family functioning.
- Family members can benefit from information about how to support the person with the AOD problem and it may encourage them to seek support themselves.
- When family members are in counselling, the outcome for the person with the AOD problem tends to be more favourable.

NEED
SUPPORT

