

This Can't Be Happening...

Most people find it very hard to accept the truth about their child's addiction. It's tempting to hear what you want to hear and see what you want to see rather than accept an unpleasant reality, but denying that reality can be dangerous... for your child and for the rest of your family.

The use of alcohol and other drugs can lower the immune system, leading to frequent colds and 'flu, and each drug comes with its own "side effects." Injection drug users can experience vein problems or infections, those snorting cocaine or meth may develop blemishes and runny noses, and opiate users may develop chronic constipation. At the extreme end of the spectrum, overdoses can lead to death.


Families' initial reactions usually fall into four stages: denial ("head in the sand," hearing only what you want to hear); emotion (anger, grief, stress, shame, guilt); control ("do what I say," "let's fix this," scapegoating, trying to rescue); chaos and confusion (you try to set limits which are overturned, you feel powerless and incompetent, your trust is shattered).

These stages can often overlap, and be repeated again and again. Families need to get support, develop awareness and get effective professional help and education. Success and hope depend on having strategies in place – both personal and interpersonal, having access to support options, taking care of your emotional, physical and spiritual wellbeing, and strengthening family relationships (see "Taking Care of Yourself").

Drug users themselves will go through five stages of change:

- ♦ **Precontemplation** Stage: there is no intention to change behaviour in the foreseeable future. Many individuals in this stage are unaware or under-aware of their problems.
- ♦ **Contemplation** Stage: people are aware that a problem may exist but are ambivalent about change and have not yet made a commitment to take action.
- ♦ **Preparation** Stage: combines intention and behavioural criteria. Individuals in this stage are intending to take action in the next month and have probably unsuccessfully taken action in the past year. There is a desire for change.

It's
as easy to get
dial-up delivery
of heroin as it is
pizza."

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- ♦ **Action Stage:** individuals modify their behaviour, experiences, or environment in order to overcome their problems. Action involves the most overt behavioural changes and requires considerable commitment of time and energy. This is a peak level of desire for change and energy; however, these levels are difficult to maintain, and people can become easily frustrated that change does not come quickly.
 - ♦ **Maintenance Stage:** people work to prevent relapse and consolidate the gains attained during action. For addictive behaviours, this stage extends from six months to an indeterminate period past the initial action.

It is helpful for family members to identify where the person using drugs is in this process. Ask yourself:

- ♦ Are they quite happy and not willing to think about the need to change?
- ♦ Are they concerned enough to be thinking about their drug taking and are more aware of the negative aspects?
- ♦ Have they identified the need to change and started to make plans?
- ♦ Are they taking steps to change?
- ♦ Are they maintaining the changes needed for their lifestyle?

Once you have identified the stage, an appropriate approach is easier to develop. Remember that your preferred goal may be that the person “remains abstinent from all drugs.” Their goal maybe to “reduce or control their drug use” or even to “be abstinent from some substances but continue to use others” – for example, give up heroin, but keep smoking cannabis now and again.

Consider accepting the possible, rather than demanding the ideal.

“You’ll
accept anything
as long as it’s
an explanation.”