

How Young Adults Can Help Themselves or Loved Ones Heal From Addiction

Addiction affects as much as 69 percent of the people in this country, whether it is their own or someone else’s problem.¹ While people of all ages, races, and economic backgrounds can have an alcohol and/or drug use problem, many young adults are gripped by the power of addiction. One of your closest friends, loved ones, or colleagues may have a problem, and many others are affected by that one person’s struggle.² Given the prevalence of these disorders, and the advances that have been made over the last 20 years in understanding the disease and how to treat it, everyone can learn about solutions to help their friends, and themselves, get better.

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration’s (SAMHSA’s) Center for Substance Abuse Treatment (CSAT), within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, is celebrating the 20th annual **National Alcohol and Drug Addiction Recovery Month (Recovery Month)** this September. This year’s theme is **“Join the Voices for Recovery: Together We Learn, Together We Heal.”** It emphasizes the need to use all available resources, in our communities and on the Internet, to educate people and their families about the disease and to help those with substance use disorders, and those close to them, get support. It also celebrates the power of community support and understanding. By opening a dialogue about the harmful effects of alcohol and drug addiction on families, friends, and communities, we can provide hope, healing, and better help those struggling with substance use disorders embark on a successful journey of long-term recovery.

Close family members and other relatives each have a front-row seat to the damages caused by substance use disorders. However, as children grow up and naturally leave home – 73 percent of Americans ages 18 to 34 no longer live with their parents – close family is not always present to notice changes in day-to-day behavior.³ Families may not be completely aware of whether their relatives have an alcohol or drug problem after they leave home, and the effects may be felt primarily by others in a person’s life, such as friends and colleagues.

This document is designed to help young adults, who often serve as the support system for their friends and colleagues. The following sections outline how addiction affects young adults and their families, including common trends such as prescription drug misuse. This piece also tells you the signs of a problem and how to get treatment for someone you know with an addiction – and how you can survive, too. If you suspect that someone has an alcohol or drug problem, you can help get him or her the support to heal. In fact, young adults ages 25 to 34 have the most positive beliefs about the possibilities for prevention, treatment, and recovery.⁴



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I started drinking at 12 and managed to *not* cross the imaginary line of no return until I was about 18. It was a period that included moves around the country, sordid relationships, several DUIs, a thousand lies, some thievery, and umpteen “never again” promises, not to mention a sense of loneliness and despair I never want to repeat.

Intervention came in 1997, as I sat hung-over next to some guy smoking a joint by my pool. Something in me shattered when my brother Chris, whom I hadn’t spoken to in quite a while, asked if I would come inside to talk. I wanted nothing to do with anything serious, but not wanting to be rude, I went inside and there they were: the intervention team.

After 28 days at a treatment center and several months of roughly a meeting a week and being with old friends, I moved to Aspen, opened a bar and proceeded to almost kill myself. I decided Aspen was the problem, so I moved to Austin for five long days and then went back to California, where I stayed with my brother and some friends, who both kicked me out. It was standing on a corner somewhere in Manhattan Beach that my journey began and the seed was planted. I called my mother in hopes of getting her to send me to rehab, but my stepfather, who was 12 years clean at the time, answered the phone. I pleaded for a specific program, but he did me the greatest favor and instead, lovingly said, “Go to 90 meetings in 90 days,” and that was that.

I went to a meeting and began my continuing journey in recovery. I attended nearly 270 meetings in my first 90 days, and eventually knew I wanted to work in treatment. I began working at a residential treatment center and quickly learned it was a tough gig, but I really liked the one-on-one work. I was lucky to experience training for a sober companion, a position I later entered and a role I love very much. Today, I have a beautiful wife and two beautiful daughters, and I know that they are miracles for a guy like me.

A Brain Disease That Can Affect Anyone

To help anyone with an addiction, first recognize that it is a disease like any other chronic illness, such as diabetes, high blood pressure, or asthma. This may be contrary to the myths you may have heard in stories surrounding celebrities with a problem, but it’s important to remember. Through recent scientific advances, we now know that drugs (including alcohol) change the structure and operation of the brain; these adjustments can be long-lasting and life-threatening. Addiction can create a compulsive need to obtain and use drugs, despite harmful consequences.⁵

No single factor predicts whether you, or someone you know, will become addicted to alcohol or drugs. Your risk is influenced by your biology, social environment, when you began to use alcohol and other drugs, and your age or stage of development. A combination of these factors influence whether someone will develop an addiction.⁶ Young people are particularly at risk. A review of 140 studies concluded that teens may be more prone to alcohol, tobacco, and other drug addiction because of the changes their brains go through during adolescent development.⁷

According to the *2007 National Survey on Drug Use and Health*:

- 35.7 percent of people aged 18 to 20 and 45.9 percent of 21- to 25-year-olds had five or more drinks on the same occasion at least once in the past 30 days (also known as binge drinking).⁸
- Young adults aged 18 to 25 used drugs at a significantly higher rate than youths aged 12 to 17 (19.7 percent versus 9.5 percent).⁹

There are many reasons why this may happen, but for some people, the transition from adolescence to adulthood can be stressful. It can be tempting to try to self-medicate through this time with alcohol and/or drugs.¹⁰ However, substance use disorders compound the stresses of other areas of your life by harming your self-esteem; making it hard to sustain meaningful relationships with family, friends, and your community; holding you back from professional success; and increasing your personal health costs.¹¹ These consequences can happen even with drugs that may “seem” safe – such as prescription drugs.

Prescription Drug Misuse

Prescription drug misuse has been on the rise over the past few decades. The 2006 National Drug Control Strategy issued by the [White House Office of National Drug Control Policy](#) identified the illegal use of pharmaceuticals as one of the fastest-growing forms of drug abuse and outlined a program to reduce the availability of such drugs for nonmedical use and get users into treatment. In addition, the director of the [National Institute on Drug Abuse](#) has called for further research to develop safe and effective pain management strategies and medications with less potential for abuse.¹² In 2007, 6 percent of young adults aged 18 to 25 were current nonmedical users of prescription drugs, greater than the percentage using any illicit drug except marijuana.¹³ In the past 12 months, among all those aged 12 or older, the number of people initiating the nonmedical use of prescription drugs was – at 2.5 million – higher than the number initiating marijuana use, which was 2.1 million.¹⁴

Your friends and loved ones may access these medications through a variety of channels, including you – whether you are aware of it or not. In both 2006 and 2007, more than half of people aged 12 or older who used prescription-type pain relievers, tranquilizers, stimulants, and sedatives nonmedically said they got the drugs from a friend or relative for free.¹⁵

Because prescription drugs are legal, it is easy to think you are helping friends if they have pain or an ailment. However, there are risks associated with taking prescription drugs that are not prescribed for you. Mixing them with alcohol, other prescription drugs, or illegal drugs can be particularly dangerous.¹⁶

To be safe, store your medicines out of sight and away from predictable places, such as the bathroom, and know that sharing your prescription drugs with someone else is illegal and dangerous.¹⁷

MYTH: Teenagers are the most at risk.

FACT: More than twice as many adults aged 18 to 25 were classified with a substance use disorder in 2007 than people aged 12 to 17 (20.7 percent versus 7.7 percent).

SOURCE: *Results From the 2007 National Survey on Drug Use and Health: National Findings*, p. 74.

Also be aware of your friends' Internet use, because now people can turn to online sources to fuel a prescription drug problem. In 2008, the [National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University](#) (CASA) identified 365 Web sites that either advertised or offered controlled prescription drugs for sale online. Of those:

- Only two were registered Internet pharmacy practice sites.
- 85 percent offered drugs for sale that required no prescription from a physician.
- Half of sites that **did** require a prescription asked that the prescription be faxed, increasing the chance of fraud and multiple use of the same prescription.¹⁸

If you notice a friend or loved one carrying around multiple bottles of pills, or witness any kind of substance use problem, consider having a conversation with the person. Below are tips about how to broach this difficult topic and help your friend get help with the appropriate treatment course and on a road of recovery.

How to Spot and Help a Friend With a Problem

Take note of the following signs and symptoms if you think a friend or loved one has a substance use disorder. People who have these symptoms as a result of substance use could have already developed a very serious, potentially life-threatening relationship with alcohol or drugs and may need help:

Physical Signs:

- Unexplained weight loss or gain
- Slow or staggering walk, poor physical coordination
- Red, watery eyes; pupils larger or smaller than usual; blank stare
- Smell of substance on breath, body, or clothes
- Needle marks on lower arms, legs, or bottoms of feet
- Tremors or shakes in the hands, feet, or head¹⁹

MYTH: If someone is able to hold down a job, he or she must be okay.

FACT: 60.4 percent of adults aged 18 or older with a substance use disorder in 2007 (or 12.3 million people) were employed full time.

SOURCE: *Results From the 2007 National Survey on Drug Use and Health: National Findings*, p. 76.

Behavioral Signs:

- Changes in eating habits
- Change in overall attitude/personality with no other identifiable cause
- Changes in friends, sudden avoidance of old crowd, hesitancy to talk about new friends
- Difficulty paying attention, forgetfulness
- General lack of motivation, energy, and self-esteem; an “I-don’t-care” attitude
- Moodiness, irritability, or nervousness
- Extreme hyperactivity, excessive talking
- Paranoia
- Chronic dishonesty
- Change in personal grooming habits
- Possession of drug paraphernalia²⁰

As difficult as it may be to have a conversation with someone about addiction, putting it off will only prolong the trouble. Even though the situation may get worse before it gets better, your friend needs to know that there are places to go for help. Remember that a trusted friend or relative can provide support and help you approach someone you suspect has a substance use disorder.

To speak with friends or those close to you about addiction:

- **Sit them down**, individually, in a private place.
- **Start with positive reinforcement** and explain that you are talking to them because you care.
- **Offer a solution** and ideas on how they can get help, such as identifying recovery support resources in your area (see the resources listed at the end of this document).
- **End with a plan of action.** If they resist help, seek professional help and keep trying.²¹

Refer to the resources near the end of this piece to get additional advice on how to help a friend admit to a problem. Convincing a friend that he or she has a problem in the first place can be a challenge. In 2007, of the 20.8 million people who needed but did not receive treatment or support at a specialty facility in the past year, only 1.3 million people (or 6.4 percent) actually felt that they needed treatment for their alcohol or drug problem.²² Regardless of whether your friend admits to having a problem, if you think there is one, encourage your friend to get help or see a doctor or a substance use disorder professional to assess a possible problem. In 2007, 3.9 million people aged 12 or older received treatment of some kind, indicating that people do seek help and work to get better.²³

Sometimes it takes as much as court-mandated treatment or simply just the urging of a trusted friend for a person to understand a problem in the face of denial. Those who enter substance use treatment programs while being encouraged by others do comparatively better in treatment, regardless of the reason they sought it in the first place.²⁴

More information to help you assess a person's substance use can be found at [Check Yourself](#). The site helps young adults understand issues related to addiction and offers factual answers to questions about substance use, first-person experiences, quizzes and message boards, as well as addiction, treatment, and recovery information and resources.

Understanding Treatment and Recovery

Treatment and recovery from substance use disorders requires a comprehensive plan designed to address all factors that contribute to the disease. Friends, colleagues, and loved ones of those with a substance use disorder need to understand the breadth of treatment and recovery support options available to find the most suitable plan.

A variety of methods can help, and in fact, new treatment options have emerged over the last 20 years.^{25, 26} Some people recover on their own; others recover through treatment and/or the assistance of self-help, mutual-aid groups, or medication-assisted therapies. If you are helping someone you know plot out a course in recovery, pay attention to traits such as age, race, employment status, religion, family issues, and drug of choice so care can be tailored to his or her needs. For example, if you have a friend with a full-time job, he or she might benefit from outpatient programs or mutual support groups. In contrast, someone who has lost his or her home or has other medical issues might find an inpatient treatment program more suitable.

You play an important role, too, as support networks are central for successful rehabilitation from addiction. The assistance of family, friends, employers, and other concerned community members can help someone achieve long-term recovery.

Helping Yourself Through a Friend or Loved One's Addiction

Even though a friend might be the one with a problem, his or her substance use disorder can weigh heavily on you. If you are living with someone who has a substance use disorder, you may experience some psychological stress, or even physical problems such as insomnia, headaches, or allergies.²⁷ Even if the person is just an acquaintance, the problem can take an emotional toll.

JOIN THE VOICES FOR RECOVERY

During this time, even though it is important for you to help your friend in their struggle, it is equally as necessary for you to maintain balance. To best help your friend or loved one, you need to deal with your frustrations and concerns about his or her situation. Support for people close to someone with an addiction can be found at:

- **Al-Anon or Alateen** – Offers support for friends and family members who know someone with alcohol dependence
- **Families Anonymous** – Helps concerned relatives and friends whose lives have been adversely affected by a loved one's addiction; also offers online support meetings
- **Nar-Anon** – A 12-step program designed to help relatives and friends of those with an addiction recover from the effects of living with an addicted relative or friend

Using the Internet to Find Support

An array of support is available online for you and your friends, families, and colleagues. Along with helping people with a substance use disorder speak with others going through similar experiences, message boards and forums offer support for anyone affected by someone else's addiction. A safe and non-threatening environment online can motivate people and help them find clarity in their situation. Some online resources include:

- **SAMHSA's "Find Substance Abuse and Mental Health Treatment" Web site** – Lists a range of resources about mental health, substance abuse, and treatment
- **SAMHSA's "Accessing Prevention, Treatment, and Recovery Online" Webcast** – Examines how technology has revamped the field of substance use disorder prevention and addiction treatment
- **The Sober Recovery Community** – Offers support forums for people in recovery, as well as family and friends
- **Sober.com** – Provides message boards for people in recovery and also provides recovery coaching from professional counselors
- **Cyber Recovery Fellowship** – Offers faith-based forums for people in recovery
- **eGetGoing** – Helps people new to recovery through online support groups led by certified counselors
- **Shouting Inside** – Helps young adults who misuse substances share their stories and their struggles with like-minded young people.

Another important resource is SAMHSA's National Helpline, **1-800-662-HELP**, for toll-free information and treatment referrals in English and Spanish, 24 hours a day.

How Friends Can Help During *Recovery Month*

This September, SAMHSA will celebrate the 20th anniversary of ***Recovery Month*** and encourages family, friends, colleagues, and other acquaintances of those with substance use disorders to participate. Make a difference by:

- **Getting educated** – Visit SAMHSA's [Web site](#) to find information and resources about substance use disorders, treatment, and recovery. As you learn about the illness of addiction, you will discover the reality of this disease and effective ways to help the people you know.
- **Getting vocal** – Talk to friends, family, and community members about your experiences with a close friend's alcohol or drug problem and ways to fight the common misconceptions people may hear about addiction.
- **Getting involved** – Go to the ***Recovery Month*** Web site at <http://www.recoverymonth.gov> to identify local event opportunities to participate in, such as volunteering your time as a mentor for children or helping to plan an event in collaboration with a local treatment facility or a recovery support center.

For more information and organizations that can help provide treatment and other resources, visit the ***Recovery Month*** Web site at <http://www.recoverymonth.gov>. Information on treatment options in your area and the special services available can be found at SAMHSA's "**Find Substance Abuse and Mental Health Treatment**" Web site, a portal that includes a searchable database of more than 11,000 U.S. treatment facilities and additional treatment resources. For additional ***Recovery Month*** materials, visit <http://www.recoverymonth.gov> or call 1-800-662-HELP.

Web sites or event examples mentioned in this document and on the ***Recovery Month*** Web site are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, or the Center for Substance Abuse Treatment.

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