

# When Your Partner Has a Drug or Alcohol Problem

## A Guide for Gay and Bisexual Men



It's tough enough when a friend has a problem with drugs or alcohol. It's even more complicated when your partner does. It's simply harder to see things objectively or to separate yourself from the effect of your partner's addiction when you're so emotionally, physically, and often financially intertwined. He needs help, and you need help. So who's left to help the relationship? *Can we both get through this together?*

This article offers some insight and advice on how to support your partner, yourself, and your relationship through this difficult period. Perhaps it will also validate your own experiences and even offer some hope. Before going further, however, it may be useful to read *When Your Friend Has a Drug or Alcohol Problem* for an overview of addiction, the recovery process, and effective helping strategies.

### The course of addiction on relationships

Although every intimate relationship is certainly unique, predictable patterns often emerge when addiction joins the partnership. **As addiction develops and evolves, most couples experience parallel changes in how their relationship feels and functions.** The common progression looks something like this:

#### ● Explanations

Early in the development of the addiction, **you and your partner explain away his occasional episodes of excessive drug use or drinking.** You may attribute them to unusual stress at work or a birthday celebration gone too far, for example. Although the events come and go, your anger, embarrassment, or disappointment may start to build up.

#### ● Doubt and distrust

Soon you realize that your partner's drug use/drinking is not normal, and **you begin to pressure him to be more careful, cut down, or quit.** This can be especially difficult if you both drank or used drugs together, you now stop, but your partner doesn't. In

this case, your partner might see the problem not as his own substance abuse but as your sudden attitude reversal towards this once shared activity. Regardless, you now become the bad guy or the nagging mother in the relationship.

At the same time, **you try to hide his problem from the outside and keep up a good front,** which can become exhausting over time. You may notice more negative emotions creeping in. *Where is he? He's hungover and now I have to do all the yard work. What is he doing all night? I hate that I don't believe him.* As resentment and distrust emerge, so too might the apologies and promises not to let it happen again. You forgive again because you love him.

#### ● Crisis

Now **you can no longer pretend everything is OK, and you spend much of the time going from crisis to crisis.** Life seems quiet for a while. Then all of

a sudden - another binge, another chunk of money gone, another 3-day disappearance, another lie that's backfired. The emotional roller coaster consumes your energy. You may feel helpless and unable to control the emotional or practical chaos of your own house-

*"Prepare for nothing to happen right away. After I confronted my partner and he promised to work on his drug use, I got my hopes up. Then the bubble burst. He kept using and nothing happened. I realized that my main goal was just to get it off my chest. I let him know I was hip to what was going on. I was available when he was ready to talk."*

hold. At this point, you might start seeking outside help.

**Sex can become a central and divisive issue**, particularly when crystal meth is involved. A common scenario goes like this: Your sex life starts to shrivel up, he starts having sex outside the relationship or going beyond the agreements in your “open” relationship. You may feel ignored sexually or even feel manipulated if your partner uses sex to “make up” for something he’s done or to prove he loves you even though he’s acting like an ass. Ultimately, sex can become something to avoid, withhold, or use as emotional leverage.

Infidelity fueled by addiction can stir a variety of responses including “retaliatory” sex. *If he can do it, I can do it too. I’m owed something.* Trying to get back at him or get him to “wake up” by fucking other men may feel empowering at first, but it’s likely to only deepen the distrust and make the situation worse. It’s best to find less inflammatory ways to take care of your sexual needs.

If you’re worried that his sexual activity might bring home HIV or an STD, start insisting on condoms, having less anal sex and getting tested more frequently. **Many men take greater sexual risks when under the influence**, so your concerns are certainly valid. Do what you need to protect yourself.

*“I knew deep down that things were in trouble. I could sense it, feel it in the air. But I questioned my instincts because I was afraid of rocking the boat and turning my partner away. When I went with my gut feeling, it helped me prepare a plan for getting through it.”*

## ● Coming to terms

**Your coping abilities eventually become stronger and now you clearly see the addiction.** You gradually assume a larger share of the responsibility for the home, friend/family commitments, and taking care of your own needs. You become more resilient to his lies and denial and less guilty for not getting pulled into them.

This period sometimes becomes the “ultimatum phase.” You want to help, you want to stick by him, but you can’t do it unconditionally. Many partners set new limits (or at least stop adjusting old ones) and begin to envision a possible change or end to the relationship.

## ● Disentangling

At this point, the “we” evolves into “you and me” as **you begin to see yourself more separately from your partner or his addiction.** Many turn to counseling, with or without their partners, in attempts to either arrest the addiction or deal with its consequences. It may be useful to work with a counselor with specialized experience in addiction and for each partner to see his own therapist outside of couples counseling.

**Should I leave?** becomes a common question here. *How long do I try and how far do I go to help until I just can’t anymore?* Clearly, the answer is different in each relationship, but there are two situations in which you should strongly consider separation, even if only temporarily:

1. Your partner’s addiction is making you sick as well and you are no longer the person you used to be. Perhaps you see yourself more depressed, withdrawn from friends, not doing the fun hobbies you used to, or having problems at work because you’re so distracted.
2. Your own financial, physical, or legal security is in jeopardy. Physical or sexual violence should never be tolerated.

**Addiction can have catastrophic legal and financial consequences.** Watch out for

deep trouble spots and take steps to protect yourself as much as possible. Distancing yourself can be tricky, of course, if you co-own a house, bank account, or other assets, but it is even more critical in these cases. Co-ownership is also an emotional symbol of trust and commitment in most relationships. Talk to a legal or financial professional for objective advice.

Some men feel a lot of social pressure to stay in a relationship. They don’t want to appear too “heartless,” or they worry what friends might say if they jump ship too soon. And what do you do about all the friends you and your partner share? What if you adore his family and they adore you? This is where **trusting your instincts is important.**

Too many guys have prolonged painful relationships by not believing their own sense that something is wrong. There are so many ways to talk yourself out of your own gut feelings. *Maybe I'm overreacting. He said he didn't get high last night. Well I acted like a jerk too.* But no matter what your partner says or what your own head says, your gut will always know when something doesn't feel right. Listen to yourself, trust yourself, believe yourself. **If something feels wrong, it probably is.**

### ● Reorganizing

**You either reconcile with your partner in his recovery or restructure your life without him.**

If the relationship ends, it doesn't mean you didn't try hard enough to make it work. Or that you didn't do the right things along the way. The responsibility for the relationship lies equally between you. He is responsible for his addiction and for its consequences on others. That may not lessen your sense of loss, betrayal, or anger, but it may help you move forward knowing that the decision to leave was at least the right one for you.

You may or may not be able to control the course of addiction on your relationship. But you might feel more in control if you can step back, see what is happening, and take steps to manage the challenges facing you in the moment. Just knowing that the doubt, confusion, frustration or despair you may be feeling are common and even predictable might help you regain perspective and cope more steadily.

### ■ Taking care of yourself

How are you coping? Are you drinking or smoking more? Missing work? Pulling away from friends because you're too caught up in stress at home, trying to hide your partner's addiction, or thinking they just don't want to hear you gripe about it anymore? These are all warning signs that you are starting to lose yourself in the dust cloud of your partner's substance abuse.

Taking care of yourself might mean signing up for a class, getting together regularly with close friends, seeing a therapist or finding an on-line support group.

**You cannot help your partner or your relationship if you yourself are falling apart.**

### ■ Treatment and life afterwards

Once the recovery process begins, **your partner will go through a lot of changes.** Mood swings, shifts in personality and physical energy, and more mood swings. He may even start talking funny, using new words and phrases he's picked up in treatment. This is generally a very hopeful and promising time, one that requires a lot of personal effort and help from others.

Your partner may be **spending a lot of time at support group meetings and making new friends** who are also in recovery. While you may feel happy that he is making such progress, you might also feel a bit jealous of his new recovery friends upon whom your partner might rely more for support than you. *"How can they understand you better when we've been together so long?"* You're not being

replaced. Only people with addiction can really "get it," and that insight and shared experience are extremely supportive in recovery.

After treatment, **you may feel anxious to get back to normal** or to feel like you deserve a little more attention after all you've been through to support him. But again,

you will have to be patient. Understand that he really does need time in early recovery to stay very focused on his own needs to avoid relapse. Having said that, don't be afraid to express your feelings honestly. Part of recovery is learning how to communicate about emotions in an open, respectful way. Your reward of a better, more loving relationship is coming.

### ■ Will our relationship change after treatment?

Yes. **Most couples do not return to their lives as if nothing has happened.** On the positive side, you may see improvement in communication: more openness, more honesty, more frequency, more sincerity. Most people emerge from treatment looking forward to a "fresh start" and to making important

*"I finally realized that there was a difference between what I wanted and what I needed. I wanted him to stop using and love me again. But I needed, bottom line, to keep my own sanity. I needed to stop my own drowning."*

changes. Of course you'll want to share in this optimism.

But you were likely the one he hurt the most, and that pain doesn't heal right away. It is normal to feel conflicted about your partner's post-treatment return to your life.

On one hand you're glad to see him and glad he's doing better, but on the other hand, you remember the stream of broken promises, deception, and bullshit. This conflict will take time to resolve. Don't pretend it isn't there. Talk about it if you feel it.

*"The only way I could really learn to trust him again was through seeing his actions, not just hearing his words. I needed to see consistency and that he was truly making an effort. But even in my most confident days, that little voice of doubt in my head never really left."*

Perhaps the hardest part of rebuilding relationships is **rebuilding trust**. Of course he wants to make changes, to make it up to you, to be a better partner. But he has probably said that countless times before, so why would now be any different? Again, this caution is something almost all partners feel. All the hopeful words do not mean as much as real, tangible actions. And without a doubt, that first time he doesn't

show up for something or doesn't call when he said he would, you'll probably wonder right away if he is drinking or using again. This is all very typical.

## A final word

After reading this, you may get the impression that the odds of your relationship surviving or even flourishing after addiction are against you. That's not always the case. Many partnerships strengthen through these challenges, and yours might too. But it takes hard, hard work on the part of both partners to get there. In either event, you will emerge with a better understanding of yourself and of what you want and need in a relationship. And this deeper awareness will help bring more authenticity and more fulfillment to this partnership or to the next.

Authored by Susan Kingston, Educator Consultant  
with the Drug Use and HIV Prevention Team,  
Public Health - Seattle & King County.  
[susan.kingston@metrokc.gov](mailto:susan.kingston@metrokc.gov)



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