

CHAPTER 1

Loving Someone with an
Addiction: A Life of Chaos



Let's face it—life with an addict is hard. No matter what the outward addiction is, the underlying dynamic of an addict's life is one of chaos. Addicts who continue to be involved with their own destructive behaviors typically experience many emotional highs and lows, creating a virtual rollercoaster of “pink clouds” followed by severe despondency, remorse, and self-loathing, with every conceivable emotion in between. Unfortunately, if you love an addict, you are likely to experience these highs and lows as well.

For example, many people with addictive behaviors develop health issues over time for a variety of reasons. These could be the result of either the physical strain of eating disorders such as anorexia or bulimia, the misuse of toxic substances such as alcohol, drugs, or cigarettes; or the enduring stress they experience from feeling the shame of engaging in such dysfunctional activities as compulsive over-spending, gambling, or Internet addiction.

In many cases, financial difficulties also arise, which can have far-reaching implications. When addicts feed their addiction, they may forget to feed their families. They may also overlook important financial concerns such as paying the rent or the mortgage. Budgets fly out the window, over-spending often becomes the norm, and monetary mayhem ensues. For someone who cares for an addict, this chaos can feel as though it is ruining your life.

THE DYNAMICS OF ADDICTION

The Beginning Stages: The Start of Denial

In the beginning stages of addiction, addicts tend to dabble in their dysfunctional behaviors without being aware or concerned about the implications of potential addiction. Here are some typical examples:

Greg starts his drug use by doing only a few lines of his friend's cocaine occasionally at parties. "Nothing to worry about," he assures himself and anyone else who dares to comment about it. Each time he indulges in cocaine, he likes it even more.

Janet's over-spending starts with a number of small shopping sprees that gradually begin to take the shape of more and more bags of items just sitting, unpacked, in the corner of her bedroom. She somehow feels more secure just having them there and tells herself she will get around to organizing them soon. Meanwhile, the shopping continues.

Don's gambling begins innocently as weekly poker nights with his buddies. He greatly enjoys the camaraderie and loves the feeling of winning, but he is becoming increasingly aware that he does not at all enjoy losing money.

At the initial stages of her eating disorder, Lisa is happy to discover that she can eat what she wants without having to be concerned about gaining weight. She feels pleased that she has found a foolproof way to keep her overeating under control; all she has to do is throw up after each meal, which seems like a fair exchange.

The Progressive Stages: The Addiction Worsens

The nature of addiction is that it is *progressive*. This means that the symptoms worsen as the addictive behaviors are pursued with increasing frequency.

As time goes on, Greg has progressed from being a social cocaine user; he now indulges every weekend, and sometimes during the week as well. Even though he is starting to feel a little concerned about it, he would never admit that to anyone.

Janet's shopping becomes increasingly problematic as new shoes, clothing, and accessories continue to fill up much of her closet space. Four \$1,000 outfits are now hanging there, unworn, with their tags still attached.

Don has graduated from weekly poker nights to full weekends spent at the local casino. He is aware that his losses far outweigh his wins as he tries to hide his dwindling cash reserves, as well as his absences from home, from his wife. Yet he is compelled to continue, telling himself that next time he might win.

Lisa now binges several times a week and always looks forward to the time when she can purge because the overeating has become worse: food has become her best friend, providing the comfort she craves in her life. Although she is finding that throwing up this often causes a burning sensation in her throat and in her stomach, she attempts to convince herself that being able to eat what she wants without gaining weight is still the way to go. The fact that she has recently gone down a couple of dress sizes encourages her to continue her addictive behavior.

The Advanced Stages: Consequences Abound

By now, Greg has increased his cocaine intake substantially. He doesn't wait for parties anymore; instead, his daily usage has increased and he has learned to hide it from his family, friends, and colleagues at work. He sometimes wonders if any of his drug buddies use as much cocaine as he does, but doesn't ask anyone for fear of being discovered. Because he is rarely hungry when he is high on coke, he has undergone a noticeable weight loss. His metabolism has also been damaged by the amount of the drug he keeps putting in his system. He feels nervous and anxious much of the time, and his family is noticing that he is much more short-tempered than he used to be. Greg is beginning to worry that other people know about his "secret" cocaine use.

Janet has now maxed out all of her major credit cards. She often finds herself awake at 3 a.m., worrying that her husband will find out. Although she is still functioning well at work, an obsessive fear of losing her job occupies many of her waking thoughts; without an income, Janet knows she will not be able to pay off her credit cards or continue her beloved buying excursions. She understands that she needs to stop spending but can't imagine her life without shopping. She has no idea whom she can talk to about this or where she can turn for help, so she keeps all of her fears to herself. And she continues to shop.

Don can't seem to stop gambling. He is totally consumed with thoughts of his next trip to the casino. He obsessively goes over and over mistakes he feels he made at the tables the last time he was there, and lives with the constant compulsion to return as soon as possible. He knows he will do whatever it takes to continue his consistent gambling, even if it means lying to his family and losing money that isn't really his to wager in the first place. He is becoming aware that he is on a downward spiral that could cost him everything.

Lisa's troubles are at an all-time high: she is now bingeing and purging several times a day. She is having problems with occasional bleeding in the lining of her esophagus, her stomach is continually churning, and the enamel on her teeth is starting to erode. Because vomiting has become difficult for her at this point, she tries using laxatives instead, which worsen her digestive system even more. On some days she even gives up her beloved food entirely because of the abdominal pain she experiences whenever she eats. As a result, she has lost a fair bit of weight and people are starting to comment about it.

DO YOU LOVE AN ADDICT?

If you're like most people who find themselves in relationships with addicts, you probably don't talk in depth with others about how you are feeling or what you are going through. You may be taking unnecessary responsibility for your loved one's behavior, feeling as if it is somehow your fault, and as a result you may be experiencing feelings of shame, guilt, and remorse. You convince yourself that the last thing you want is for anyone to know what is happening in your life, believing that no one would be able to understand. This can create a sense of isolation for you, because you may not realize there are other people in the same predicaments, experiencing exactly the same feelings you are.

Chances are you've tried many ways to change the situation, attempting to get some respite from the chaos in your life. The following are some of the most common tendencies of people who love an addict. Be aware of how many may apply to you.

- * You are sick and tired of the pain and/or abuse in your relationships.

- * You yell at the addicted person in your life, threatening to leave the relationship if the problem behavior doesn't stop.
- * You complain to your friends and family members about this person even though you know that they don't know how to help you.
- * You protect the addict by making excuses for the behavior.
- * You make appointments with doctors and therapists for your addicted loved one, only to find that the person is unwilling to go.
- * You try to convince yourself that the problem really isn't that bad.
- * You feel sorry for yourself, baffled about why this is happening to you and what to do about it.

In addition, you may think the other person's behavior is your doing because you have not found a way to make the turmoil stop. Perhaps you feel like a bad parent or spouse because you think you should be able to do something to end this terrible situation. To make matters worse, your addicted loved one may actually be telling you that you are to blame for his or her addictive behavior!

“IT’S NOT THAT BAD...IS IT?”

If you have a practicing addict in your life, you may already be an expert in convincing yourself and others that the situation in which you find yourself isn't really that bad. You may have denial down to a fine art—in fact, this very denial may be the only way you can justify continuing to stay in the relationship.

You probably have your moments of despair, asking yourself why this is happening to you. Or you may have already become used to the pain and unpredictability, the feeling of waiting anxiously for your precarious house of cards to come tumbling down yet again. You likely live in a whirlwind of emotions ranging from fear, frustration, and hopelessness when things are at their worst, to relief, confidence, and a misguided optimism that all will be well when things are at their best.

It's even possible that you think it is normal to live this way—perhaps you believe this is how life is for everybody. You may already be so used to the lies, the deception, the manipulation, and the self-absorption of the practicing addict that living this way has become, in effect, your “comfort zone.”

YES, IT REALLY *IS* THAT BAD!

But no one should have to live like that.

Although the details of your experience will undoubtedly differ from someone else's, the emotions you feel are often exactly the same emotions that other people feel when they are dealing with a loved one's addiction.

Some of the most common emotions include:

- * guilt and shame
- * anger and anxiety
- * frustration and fear

- * confusion and powerlessness
- * hopelessness and depression
- * desperation and despondency

If someone you love is abusing drugs or alcohol, or is engaging in other addictive behaviors such as disordered eating, problem gambling, smoking, Internet addiction, an abusive relationship, or compulsive over-spending, please remember that *there is hope for things to get better!* This book is going to show you how to do just that.

HELPING VERSUS ENABLING

Since it is likely that nobody has shown you how to improve your circumstances when dealing with a person with addictive behaviors, you probably don't really know what kind of action will truly help. If you are reading this book, it is probable that you have tried everything you could think of to be of assistance to your addicted loved one, likely to no avail. And, in fact, because you did not have any tried-and-true template to use, you may have been "enabling" the addiction to continue rather than helping it to stop.

When you enable other people, you unwittingly encourage them to continue their addictive behaviors. As an example, let's look at the case of a woman whose husband often drinks excessively at night, sometimes to the point where he is too hung over to go to work the next morning. If this is happening regularly, perhaps it has become her pattern to be the one to call her husband's boss and say that he is "feeling sick today" and unable to come to work. By participating in the relationship in this way and covering up for her husband, she is actually rescuing him and laying the groundwork for him not to have to take responsibility for himself. This constitutes enabling behavior on her part.

As she continues to shield her husband from the things he doesn't want to face about himself, she will likely find that she is developing some addictive behaviors of her own that may well be interfering with the potentially healthy functioning of her marriage.

For example, if she feels she needs to walk on eggshells around her husband for fear of setting off his anger, or if she believes that she is in any way responsible for her husband's drinking, she may not feel comfortable talking to him about the problems she is encountering in their relationship. Without this type of ongoing discussion between partners, issues that are already difficult to deal with will only become more problematic since neither person is taking any positive action to remedy them.

As we go through the top ten survival tips for loving someone with an addiction, you will learn how to offer healthier and more effective choices to your addicted loved one. When you are able to do this, you will feel a sense of realistic control in your life. This will also lead you to feel an increase in your self-respect, which is, without a doubt, the most important thing you can change about yourself.

FOCUSING ON YOURSELF

Your own recovery from participating in dysfunctional behaviors begins when you start to focus on *yourself*. In order to stay balanced and healthy while loving an addict, you must be willing to turn the focus of your attention and energy away from the addicted person and onto yourself.

As we go through the top ten survival tips together, you will be guided to look inside yourself to understand what you can indeed change about your life as well as what you truly cannot change. As a result, you will see some important shifts begin to occur in your significant relationships with others.

Perhaps the best news of all is that you will develop the increased self-respect necessary for you to feel happier and more confident in your most important relationship, the one you are in at all times: the relationship you have with yourself. As you gain control over your own life in healthy ways, you will ultimately become a role model for your addicted loved ones to gain control over theirs.