



# Hope, Healing, and Dealing with

*It's difficult to watch your spouse make harmful choices. But hope and peace are available—for both of you.*

# ADDICTION

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In my work as a therapist, rarely a day passes when I don't hear from someone who wonders how he or she can help a spouse overcome an addiction. My answer often surprises these individuals. First, I state that it is not their responsibility to "fix" their spouse's problem and that the addiction may be no fault of theirs. I then explain that while there are many things they can do to help a spouse overcome an addiction, they cannot control the situation for their spouse.

At the same time, I emphasize that they should not be passive in this situation. Individuals can do much to support their spouses in overcoming addictions while at the same time finding their own healing.

## Understanding the Problem

People who engage in addictive behavior often live in a world of denial. They may tell themselves, "It's not that bad," "I'm not hurting anyone but myself," or "I can stop anytime I want." Similarly, husbands and wives are often in denial after first discovering their spouse's behavior. They may find it difficult to accept that their spouse would engage in a particular activity, or they may choose to believe it was only an isolated incident. While it may have been a one-time event, more often the addiction is a bigger problem than the spouse first suspected.

Accepting the full scope of the problem is necessary for healing to begin. I advise spouses to calmly, and with

love and support, encourage their partners to fully disclose the extent of their addictive behavior rather than allowing information to trickle in over time. Specific details may not be necessary; rather, it is more important to disclose the type of addictive behavior, its duration, and its frequency.

Upon learning of a spouse's addiction, an individual

may experience a wide range of emotions, including anger, shame, betrayal, fear, disgust, and humiliation. These feelings are normal. But how the person deals with these feelings can make a big difference in the outcome of the situation.

It is common for those in a crisis to think in erroneous ways. They should take care not to jump to conclusions, "catastrophize" things, overgeneralize, or get stuck in all-or-nothing thinking.<sup>1</sup>

One should avoid discussing difficult issues when tempers and emotions are at their peak. Physical, emotional, or verbal attacks will only make a painful situation worse. A bishop and a licensed therapist may

be of help when a couple begins to discuss the damage the addictive behavior has caused.

## Control

It is difficult to watch someone you love and care for make choices that you know will hurt them and others. As a result, many people try to control their spouse's addiction problems by policing, monitoring, and otherwise



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trying to prevent recurrences of the behavior or to catch them in the act. These efforts are usually not effective and may lead to more frustration and hopelessness. We cannot control another's behavior; only the offender can make lasting changes.

My advice to spouses is to focus their attention and efforts on what they *can* change, not on what they can't. They can work on efforts to make their own lives better. These changes may not have any effect on their husband or wife, but this should not be the goal of the behavior.

One word of caution here is to maintain balance in life. Reading the scriptures, praying, and going to the temple can help build spiritual strength and bring peace in these situations. However, some people devote so much time and energy to these activities that they neglect other areas of their lives. They may believe that the more time they spend doing worthy activities, the more likely it is that the Lord will soften the heart of their spouse. Yet all things, even spiritual things, should be "done in wisdom and order" (Mosiah 4:27). Remember that it is up to the

addicted individual to take the steps that will lead to overcoming the addiction.

As spouses keep the following list in mind, they may be able to avoid making some common mistakes.

<b>Factors Spouses Cannot Control</b>	<b>Factors Spouses Can Control</b>
Their partner's behavior	Their response to their partner's behavior
Their partner's desire to change	Their ability to care for themselves
Their partner's repentance process	Their willingness to forgive
	Their own spiritual progression

### **Trust**

Spouses often struggle to forgive their partners for addictive behaviors. Sometimes they mistakenly assume that extending forgiveness also means restoring trust. Yet trust and forgiveness are two separate issues. A person can repent and be forgiven long before he or she earns trust again.

Spouses should remember that just as the problem may have taken years to develop, it will take time to resolve. I counsel spouses to keep in mind that being patient and understanding does not mean condoning, accepting, or enabling their partner's behavior. It is critical that they establish clear, healthy boundaries and that their husband or wife understands what kinds of behaviors will not be tolerated.

### **Effects of Addiction on Others**

When spouses learn of a partner's involvement with an addiction—especially if that addiction involves pornography—they are likely to have diminished feelings of self-worth. They may feel responsible or guilty, and they may feel a deep sense of shame. They may question their ability to meet their partner's needs, and if the partner struggles with pornography, they may believe they are unattractive. They may ask themselves, "What is wrong with me?"



If you find yourself in this situation, keep in mind that the sins of others always have a negative effect on those they love, but you did not commit the sin. Your partner's sin is not necessarily about you; it is about your partner's inability to manage emotions effectively or to use appropriate coping skills. Even though the addiction hurts you deeply and feels personal, it is not. As a spouse, you may have a minor role to play in the overall scenario, but you did not cause the individual to become addicted. The addiction was the result of choices your spouse made.

Children are particularly vulnerable when their parents have an addiction, yet their needs are often overlooked. The nonaddicted spouse may need to set aside his or her own hurt and pain at times to help meet the needs of children in these situations. Children need love, assurance, and a sense of security. They need to know that even though their parents may be in a tense situation, things will be OK. Parents may want to ensure that their children get counsel or support from their bishop and perhaps a licensed therapist.

If a parent is violent or abusive, the spouse should get help immediately. It is important not to remain silent. If physical abuse is occurring, the spouse should call an emergency telephone number immediately and then call the bishop. Families, friends, and shelters for women and children can also be resources during a crisis.

### The Lord Will Help

These suggestions are not all-inclusive. Bishops can provide inspired counsel when one is dealing with a spouse's addiction. If necessary, licensed therapists with experience in treating addictions can provide suggestions that are specific to the situation.



### A GREAT SPIRITUAL POWER OF REDEMPTION

*"The suffering you endure from resisting or from*

*leaving a life-style of addiction or perversion is not a hundredth part of that suffered by your parents, your spouse or your children, if you give up. Theirs is an innocent suffering because they love you. To keep resisting or to withdraw from such a life-style is an act of genuine unselfishness, a sacrifice you place on the altar of obedience. It will bring enormous spiritual rewards.*

*"Remember that agency, that freedom of choice that you demanded when you forsook your covenants? That same agency can now be drawn upon to exert a great spiritual power of redemption."*

**President Boyd K. Packer, President of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, "Covenants," Ensign, Nov. 1990, 86.**

The gospel ensures us that change is possible. But hope is a prerequisite. While spouses cannot control their partner's behavior, they can hope for their partner's healing. More important, they can make the choice to place their ultimate hope in the Lord, knowing that regardless of their partner's decisions, the Lord can help them bear their burdens through the power of His Atonement. As He declares in 3 Nephi 9:14: "Behold, mine arm of mercy is extended towards you, and whosoever will come, him will I receive; and blessed are those who come unto me."

The Lord can give impressions and guidance as to what paths to take, and He can assure a couple of His love for both of them. He is the Master Healer and can change the hearts of all who are sufficiently willing and humble to

follow Him. The words of Alma, speaking to the people of Zarahemla, may be applied here:

"Have you sufficiently retained in remembrance the captivity of your fathers? Yea, and have you sufficiently retained in remembrance his mercy and long-suffering towards them? And moreover, have ye sufficiently retained in remembrance that he has delivered their souls from hell?

"Behold, he changed their hearts; yea, he awakened them out of a deep sleep, and they awoke unto God" (Alma 5:6–7). ■

*The Church has an Addiction Recovery Program (ARP), sponsored by LDS Family Services, to help Church members who desire to recover from addiction as well as to help family members and friends. For more information, visit [www.ldsfamilyservices.org](http://www.ldsfamilyservices.org) or contact the LDS Family Services office nearest you. The manual Addiction Recovery Program: A Guide to Addiction Recovery and Healing (36764) is available at Church distribution centers or at [www.ldscatalog.com](http://www.ldscatalog.com).*

#### NOTE

1. For more information on thinking errors, the book *Feeling Good: The New Mood Therapy* by David D. Burns, M.D., (1980) may be helpful.