

Helping Loved Ones through Addiction without Enabling

Does someone you love struggle with addiction? Starting with addressing your own fears may be the best way to help.

By Thomas G. Kimball, PhD
Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist

Addiction recovery is completely real and possible—as a therapist, I’ve seen it. Nevertheless, watching someone we love suffer from addiction can be terrifying. And when fear or stress affects us, we don’t usually perform at our best. We often make impulsive decisions motivated by fear that can even end up enabling the addiction.

In those circumstances, it’s helpful to look at the motivation behind our problematic behaviors. Better understanding ourselves and our family members will help us make good choices in the long run, strengthen our relationships, and support those we care about as we move toward recovery together.

Recognizing Enabling or Fear-Based Behaviors

Enabling behaviors include protecting the person struggling with addiction from the consequences of their actions. Co-suffering family members or friends

who participate in these fear-based behaviors may think that they’re being helpful, or they may care so much about their loved one’s approval that they lose their sense of identity and perspective.

Examples of these types of behaviors could include loved ones keeping secrets for the person with addiction, making excuses for their bad behavior, blaming others for their actions, paying their debts, tolerating abuse from them, or not following through with boundaries that have been created. These can be detrimental to recovery.

Understanding the “Why”

It can be easy to get frustrated with family members—or with yourself—for behaving this way. But it’s important to understand that behaviors we often label as “codependent” or “enabling” are motivated by fear, not by some personality flaw. It’s natural for someone to feel afraid, frustrated, angry, or anxious when they want to protect a loved one from harm.

It’s also easy to blame yourself, others, or family dynamics as the reason behind your loved one’s struggle. But you shouldn’t place blame on anyone—addiction is formed from a complicated set of biological, psychological, and social factors. Realizing that you are having a natural reaction of fear to chaos can bring you a measure of peace and help you understand how to move forward.



So, How Can You Help?

I'm often asked, "What can I do to help my loved one who is struggling with addiction?" And the answer usually starts with addressing fear. Here are a few ways to do that:

- **Find your own healing.** Reaching out for help is important for both your loved one and you. You can start walking your own path to recovery by finding a therapist trained in addiction recovery, exploring the Church's Addiction Recovery Program materials, talking to a trusted Church leader about your situation, or attending an addiction-recovery group for families. Reaching out for help isn't always easy, but doing so will help you understand your loved one's circumstances, find healing, and make better decisions for your own life.





- **Work on loving yourself.** Taking care of yourself allows you to have the energy and strength to show love and support to others in healthy ways. Think of it like watering seeds of self-compassion and self-kindness that will later bloom into something nourishing to others. One way to show love for yourself is by developing more powerful ways to cope with fear and stress. Meditation, exercise, good nutrition, and a positive hobby can help you overcome impulsive behaviors and unhealthy responses to your loved one's addiction.



- **Stick with boundaries.** Healthy relationship boundaries are an important part of the journey to recovery. They make expectations clear and define respectful behavior. An example of a financial boundary is deciding not to give money to someone struggling with addiction until they are ready to accept professional help. An example of an emotional boundary is distancing yourself immediately whenever someone is insulting, angry, or lashing out.

What areas of your relationship might need healthy boundaries? While creating boundaries can be difficult and frustrating, they can end up being the most loving and helpful thing you can do for someone caught in addiction. They are vital to recovery and success. Be patient with yourself and your loved one as you start using boundaries in your relationship—it takes practice!

- **Find strength in Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ.** The prophet Mormon teaches that “perfect love casteth out all fear” (Moroni 8:16). Love is powerful! And the embodiment of perfect love is our Heavenly Father and our Savior, Jesus Christ (see John 3:16; Doctrine and Covenants 34:1–3). They empower us to cast fear from our lives—this minute, this hour, this day, and throughout our lifetime. Strengthening our relationship with Them gives us the strength and hope we need to reach out for help, find our own recovery, and support those we love. With Their guidance, we “can do all things” (Alma 26:12).




Holding On to Hope

Although addiction can be devastating, it can also give us an opportunity for spiritual refinement. We can develop courage as we help suffering family members to heal. We can develop patience as we walk the path of recovery.

Regardless of where you and your loved one are right now, don't give up! The courage it takes for individuals who suffer from addiction and co-suffering family members to heal and walk the path of recovery is awe-inspiring. I have witnessed miracles and successes with many who have embarked on this spiritual journey. Keep holding on to hope. As you move toward recovery, you can learn to love yourself and others more fully and find a purposeful, peaceful, and Christ-centered life. ■

For a list of additional resources, see the digital version of this article in the Gospel Library app or at [ensign.ChurchofJesusChrist.org](https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org).



“ If you are
lonely,

PLEASE KNOW
*you can find
comfort.*

If you are
discouraged,

PLEASE KNOW
*you can find
hope.*

If you are
poor in spirit,

PLEASE KNOW
*you can be
strengthened.*

If you feel you
are broken,

PLEASE KNOW
*you can be
mended.*”

ELDER JEFFREY R. HOLLAND
of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles,
“Broken Things to Mend,” *Ensign*, May 2006, 71.