

Talking to a loved one battling substance abuse: Staying positive is key

September 25 2023, by Cara Murez



A conversation with a family member or loved one struggling with

addiction can be the catalyst for getting help.

But it's important to choose your words carefully when discussing possible addiction to controlled substances with your loved one, said [Dr. Aleksandra Zgierska](#), a professor of family and [community medicine](#) at Penn State College of Medicine.

Staying positive is important.

"Change can start with just a conversation," Zgierska said in a college news release. "But that conversation can't be antagonistic. People are not motivated to change based on negative emotions."

Be supportive and non-judgmental, she advised.

"Society often treats addiction as shameful or a weakness of character," Zgierska said. "The stigma is pervasive. That situation has to change."

[Braden Linn](#), an assistant professor of psychiatry and [behavioral health](#) at Penn State Health, recommends using [cognitive behavioral therapy](#) to help substance use patients.

His preference is based on the concept that thoughts and behaviors are linked. This approach has proven to be both effective and efficient in treating patients with [substance use disorders](#), he said.

"Use of illicit drugs not only affects [physical health](#), but also mental and social health," Linn said in the release. "As a result, it affects relationships."

He, too, suggests being positive.

"Say things like 'I love you and I care about you and I want to see you

well," Linn advised.

Reducing [negative emotions](#) can help bring about the [behavioral changes](#) necessary for recovery.

Act quickly to help direct those with substance use disorders to clinics and recovery-oriented organizations, Linn said. Work-based employee assistance programs may be another option.

Recovery takes time, he added.

"It's possible your loved one will have a relapse," Linn said. "It's important not to see that as a failure, but to recognize that the person is on a long recovery journey and continue to offer love and support."

Zgierska recommended avoiding terms like "addict," "clean" or "dirty."

"That implies the person is defined by their struggle with substance use," she said. "Referring to them as a person with substance use disorder underscores the fact they exist outside their disease."

The U.S. National Institute on Drug Abuse recommends avoiding words like user, substance or drug abuser, junkie, alcoholic, drunk, former addict and reformed addict.

"Let's communicate, in the right way. I have had patients who say, 'My parents never talked to me. They didn't care,'" Zgierska said. "And the family says in response, 'We cared a lot. We just didn't know what to do or say.'"

More information: The U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration has more [help for addiction](#).

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