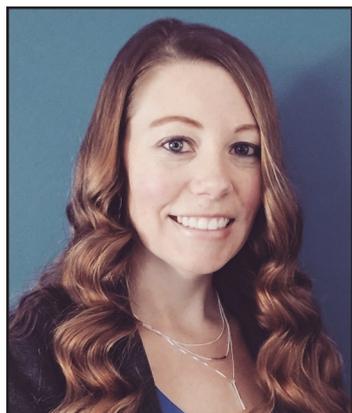


# WALKING THROUGH EARLY RECOVERY WITH OUR LOVED ONES



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the structure of the brain, leading to reduction of white matter that connects the limbic system and frontal lobe. During early recovery, neuroplasticity occurs—the brain goes through a healing process, restoring damaged connections. Depending on the substance and length of use, this process takes between 9 and 18 months. During this time, the brain makes an overabundance of associations with using. When individuals encounter an external or internal trigger, their brain is flooded with signals telling them to use or drink. This is an unconscious process—one over which they have no control.

Thankfully, with the use of healthy supports, the repetition of coping skills, and a continuous focus on recovery, the brain can heal. This is why treatment providers encourage the individual to engage in an entire continuum of care. These are also the primary reasons that 12-Step, Celebrate Recovery, and SMART Recovery groups work so effectively—they offer social support, healthy skills, and an emphasis on recovery.

## How can you support this process?

Your support during the first 18 months is vital, but it is important to recognize the difference between support and enabling our loved ones. Enabling occurs when we shield them from the negative consequences of their decisions and manage their responsibilities for them. Support is being present and showing love without judgement, while allowing them to make their own choices and experience natural consequences. The good news is that there are many ways to be supportive and foster the recovery process during this stressful time.

**1. Educate yourself and learn about the recovery process.** Most treatment centers have family education groups and encourage family sessions. Knowledge is power.

**2. Try to limit expectations.** You may still hold resentment for the things your loved one said or did. Now that he or she is not in a substance/alcohol-induced fog, he or she may be filled with guilt and

shame; these feelings can be overwhelming. On some days, just not using/drinking is the greatest victory—validate this!

## 3. Don't push your version of recovery.

This journey is different for everyone. Whether your loved one chooses abstinence, Medication-Assisted Treatment, or harm reduction, support that decision.

**4. Be present, listen, talk, and be patient.** Share what you do to cope in healthy ways and explore self-care techniques together.

## 5. Create a safe space by going places and doing

**things that are not connected to old behaviors.** This is a time to build new healthy neuro-connections.

**6. Set healthy boundaries and be honest.** Ask about your loved one's relapse-prevention plan and how you can be supportive if you notice red flags. Most people don't realize they are moving towards relapse until it is too late.

**7. Allow them to make mistakes and recognize relapse can be part of the process.** Try to approach this without judgment, and don't use your support as a weapon.

## Take care of yourself!

Early recovery is draining for everyone, and it is important to take care of yourself to avoid compassion fatigue. Try to practice acceptance, allowing your loved one to make his or her own decisions and celebrate small victories. When feeling anxious, focus on things you DO have control over. Share your feelings with others and maintain your own support system. Never forget: In the same way that addiction impacts the entire family, so does recovery. Armed with knowledge, support, and resources, you and your loved one can get through this most challenging phase and on a path to lifelong recovery!

According to the National Institute on Drug Abuse, drug and alcohol use has increased dramatically during the pandemic. However, research indicates that only 19% of individuals living with substance use disorder obtain treatment. If your loved one is in this small percentage, congratulations to both of you! You may be wondering how you can best support your loved one during this difficult time. Recovery from substance use is a lifelong process, and the first 9 to 18 months are of paramount importance.

Supporting a loved one struggling with addiction can feel frustrating, overwhelming, lonely, and never-ending. Spouses may feel resentful shouldering extra responsibilities. Parents of adult children may blame themselves and question their decisions, asking, "What could I have done differently?" But then things change, and the day comes that you have longed for—your loved one finally chooses treatment. You breathe a sigh of relief. You believe he or she will finally get the help that's desperately needed, and life will return to "normal." This is not necessarily the case, and it's important to understand why.

Early recovery is a stressful and precarious time for the individual and, by extension, the people providing support. Individuals in early recovery face tremendous challenges such as mood swings, irritability, anxiety, unhealthy behaviors, skepticism, and incredible transformation.

## What happens during early recovery?

Addiction and trauma damage

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