



Boundaries with Substance Abusers

Proverbs 20:1 says, “Wine is a mocker and beer a brawler; whoever is led astray by them is not wise” (NIV), but you don’t need a proverb to tell you that too much alcohol or drugs is a problem not only for the person who drinks and uses, but for the family members too. Drug use, abuse and addiction (legal and illegal drugs) have similar patterns and problems for the user and the user’s family as alcohol does for the drinker and the drinker’s family, so for the purpose of simplification, I will refer to both of them as substance abuse for the rest of this article. Here are some principles that will show you how to set boundaries with a loved one whose substance abuse bothers you:

Face the Truth. Before you can set boundaries, you have to face the truth. One of the common components of substance abuse is denial. The user denies there is a problem and the family often buys into this denial too hoping that the problem will go away on its own or that it isn’t as bad as they think it is. Facing the truth allows you to direct your emotional energy into figuring out how to respond to the drug and alcohol use. You won’t be making good choices about anything as long as you are in denial. And don’t worry about whether your loved one is an alcoholic or just a person who drinks too much or an addict or just someone who uses drugs. If it is a problem for you, then you need to deal with it.

Detach with Love. It is easy to focus all your time and energy onto the user. You want to make the substance abuse stop by forcing your loved one to admit there is a problem and then to want to change. If it worked, it would be worth it; but it doesn’t. It only robs you of the ability to enjoy your own life. Instead, you need to learn how to live your own life, while treating your loved one with dignity and kindness while allowing him/her to be self-responsible. You do this by recognizing that your loved one has the right to make personal choices (even if that choice is to drink or use), but also has the responsibility to deal with the consequences. You have the right and responsibility to make your own choices and that includes setting boundaries.

Set your Boundaries. Once you admit there is a problem and then let go of trying to force your loved one to change, the focus will be on you and you will have to figure out what you will and will not do about the many difficult situations you are faced with as a result of your loved one’s choices. It takes time to figure out what your bottom line is and even more courage to draw the line and then back it up with consequences, so be patient with yourself while you are trying to figure out your boundaries. You will know what your boundaries are when you are ready to set them and stick to them.

Here are some common boundary dilemmas:

- **Do you buy the alcohol/drugs?** Some people buy the alcohol and even drink with alcoholics to watch them or to keep them drinking at home where they are safe. Others obtain prescription drugs and occasionally buy the drugs and use them with the user. Whether the alcoholic/user can drink and use in your home or not is a boundary issue for you. Buying the alcohol and drugs only makes you an enabler. Providing money for the alcohol and drugs also makes you an enabler and so does paying other bills so the user has extra money to buy the alcohol/drugs. And drinking and using with them will only make you a drinker and user too.
- **Do you pour out the alcohol and throw out the drugs?** Many people try to control the drinking by looking for the substances and then pouring out the alcohol and throwing away the drugs. The reasoning is “If it isn’t there, it won’t get drunk or used.” The reality is that more will be bought and your budget will get even tighter, so it doesn’t help to throw it out. Throwing it out also makes you the watchman and keeps you focused on the drinking and using. This becomes a game and doesn’t make the person stop. The one exception is that because drugs are illegal and you can get in legal trouble for having them in your house or car, you can throw out any illegal substance you find on your property.
- **Do you take the car keys?** This is a tough dilemma. You have complete control over whether you drive with an intoxicated person and you shouldn’t under any circumstances. You should also do whatever it takes to not allow your children to drive in the car with someone who has been drinking or using drugs. You do this by taking two cars to places you know there will be drinking/using or calling for a ride. Arguments can be made for taking the keys and not taking the keys. If the alcoholic/addict will let you take the keys, then do because using and driving is dangerous for the person and others on the road. However, most alcoholics/addicts won’t allow you to take the keys without a scene and consequences to you. When you believe it is your responsibility to prevent the person from using and driving, you will become overly focused on what he/she is doing—precisely what you want to stop.
- **Do you count and mark the bottles/pills/bags?** This is another attempt to monitor the alcoholic and addict. Does it really matter how much someone drinks or swallows or smokes—two, three, four, or more? Isn’t it really the fact that the drinking/using bothers you that matters even if it isn’t every day or is less one day than the other? Searching for the alcohol and drugs keeps you caught up in the obsession to force the addict to change. This is simply an attempt to convince you that the person has a problem, is getting better, or getting worse when you know the truth already. Sometimes, this is also an attempt to help you win an argument with the alcoholic/addict by being able to argue that the

drinking/using is an addiction. It doesn't matter: the response will be the same whether or not you can provide a number.

- **Do you drive your loved one around after the DUI (driving under the influence ticket)?** You can do this if you want, but only if it is easy for you and you don't have to change your schedule. If it is a sacrifice for you, then you are bearing the consequences of the drinker's/user's choices. Wouldn't it be better for him/her to face the full consequences of the drinking/using by having to figure out how to get around without a car? This would go a long way toward increasing the odds that there won't be another DUI. Addicts/alcoholics don't change unless family and friends stop bailing them out.
- **Do you bail your loved one out of jail?** It isn't easy to allow your loved one to sit in jail. Horror stories of what can happen in jail may lead you to run down and post bail immediately. Fear of him/her losing a job if work is missed also might prompt you to post bail. This is your choice but remember that the alcoholic/addict needs to experience the consequence of his/her choices. Drugs can result in lengthy jail sentences after repeated offenses and even be classified as felonies. If the alcoholic/addict doesn't get the message early, bailing him/her out can lead to more problems later on.
- **Do you allow substance use in your home?** You can decide whether or not you will allow substance use in your home. If it is your spouse, this will be hard to enforce unless you are willing to separate, but it is still a line you can draw. It is often easier to draw a line against illegal drug use than alcohol, since alcohol is legal. Some considerations are whether small children are observing the drinking/drug use, how intoxicated the person gets, whether you can stand being around the person, whether the person has a personality change that is abusive or raging, and whether there is any danger to anyone. Regardless, you can refuse to argue or interact with a substance abuser when using drugs or alcohol. It is impossible to make sense with someone who is under the influence of substances.
- **Do you get your loved one help?** Many families have paid for expensive rehabilitation programs only to have the person drink and use again. Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous are the best programs out there and have the benefit of being an ongoing support program. Some hospitals have inpatient detox centers and 30-day programs with after-care. Other programs are run by private organizations. The most important factor is the willingness of the drinker to stop drinking or the user to stop using; the specific program matters less and a drinker/drug user often benefits from having to figure out how to get sober on his/her own.
- **Do you pay the bills and offer financial support?** Alcoholics and addicts often have trouble paying their bills because of the money spent on the substance(s) and/or the

- inability to keep a job due to the substance abuse and lack of dependability. It isn't easy to watch someone you love lose a home, go without food, lose a car, or get thrown on the street, but if you pay the bills and offer money you will be enabling him/her to continue to use without feeling the consequences. You also have to decide if allowing the person to live in your house while he/she is using/drinking is enabling him/her to continue to use/drink.
- **Do you make excuses for missed work, appointments, and events?** The friends and loved ones around alcoholics and addicts worry about the consequences from their drinking and using, but the drinker/user appears not to worry. Well-meaning people begin to lie and make excuses for them. The truth is that this only allows them to continue to drink and use without having to face the consequences. This is called "enabling" and until it stops, they won't hit a bottom and have a reason to stop drinking and drugging.
- **Do you call your loved one an alcoholic or addict?** It doesn't matter whether you call the person an alcoholic/addict or not; the person has a drinking/drug problem and you have a problem with the drinking/using. The only thing that matters is figuring out how you can live your life whether or not the person is willing to get help. It is okay to speak the truth and call it what it is, but don't get hung up on whether the person accepts it or whether they are a true alcoholic/addict or not.

God has established the law of reaping what you sow (Galatians 6:7-8). Drinkers and drug users need to deal with their problems; you need to figure out how to live your own life whether the drinker/user stops or not and you do this by ending enabling and trying to force change and focusing instead on yourself. Step One in Alcoholics Anonymous and Al-Anon is: "We admitted we were powerless over alcohol and that our lives had become unmanageable." The drinker/user is powerless over the addiction to the substance and you are powerless over the drinker/user. When you focus on trying to make that person change, your own life becomes a mess. You need to step back, manage your own life and set boundaries that protect you and keep you from becoming part of the problem.