

CHANGE IS RARELY A STRAIGHT LINE:

Conversation Paths to Support Loved Ones

HELPING OUR LOVED ONES THROUGH THE PROCESS OF CHANGE CAN FEEL LIKE RIDING A ROLLERCOASTER.

Substance use disorder is a disease that can be treated. If our loved ones are dealing with chronic physical health conditions like diabetes or hypertension, we tend to expect the need for ongoing support as they navigate health care systems and potential lifestyle changes. People with a substance use disorder or experiencing a substance use challenge should be given the same consideration. But internal motivation can fluctuate, and external factors can be complex to navigate and disrupt. How can we talk with our loved ones in ways that reflect their strengths and cultural connections to growth and change? How can we be their ally? What helps people be more or less willing to talk about and explore the possibilities of growth and change?



Relationship at the Center

As the saying goes, “It’s about the journey, not the destination.” Change is a process that doesn’t always have an exact, known outcome. We contribute to creating an environment in which our loved ones can feel safe, seen, valued and heard when we manage our own emotional state. Showing up as our genuine selves (not perfect, doing our best, continually learning) sets an example and invites them to do the same.



Questions for Self-awareness

- What are my feelings and beliefs about my loved ones and their substance use?
- How does my own history or experience influence how I approach this?
- What are some internal judgments I might hold that I need to be more aware of?
- In what way can I approach my loved ones with openness and empathy for their ideas, values and strengths?



We can show our acceptance by meeting our loved ones where they are (not where we want them to be!) and learning **where they want to go**. This includes giving them space to express their beliefs, values, identities and culture.



Accepting someone for who they are and where they are in their process of growth and change doesn't mean you have to agree with them. Nor does it mean you are giving them permission to continue to use substances. What it does mean is that you are acknowledging the current state of things as they are. Your acceptance may lead to the other person also accepting where they are, feeling understood and connecting with you as someone who is safe and trusted. As a result, they may be more motivated to change behaviors. Center the conversation on partnership, empowerment and compassion. While there may be points of disagreement, the relationship remains the focus.



For example:

“I'd like to share what has been on my mind, and then I'd be really interested in hearing what you think.”

“How does having a conversation about this sound? I want to learn what this has been like for you. If you are looking for suggestions, I can share some. What you decide to do is up to you.”

Conversation Pathways



Active Listening

Listening statements increase connection. When we acknowledge our loved one's words, beliefs or feelings as they are, they experience being understood — and being valued for their perspectives. Our active listening becomes a mirror so they can see themselves without judgment or interpretation.

Loved one:



We've been friends for a long time, but you don't really know what it's like for me. I feel like I'm always walking a fine line — like I can't show weakness, but I also have to be careful about how I come across to others. Getting high helps me get out of my head for a little while because I'm so tired of carrying all of this. It's exhausting.

Listening statements:

- **It sounds like you're under a lot of constant pressure — feeling like you have to manage how you're seen while also not being able to fully let your guard down.**
- **Thank you for sharing and trusting me with your words.**
- **Almost like you don't get much space to just be yourself, and the only relief you've found is something that helps you shut that off for a bit.**

Loved one:



It's hard for me to talk about this with you. I already don't like what I'm going through, and to be vulnerable and hear your judgments about me or my use makes things worse.

Listening statements:

- **It's hard for you to talk about this with me.**
- **You want to be seen and heard without judgment.**
- **Being vulnerable with me is hard. My judgmental comments do not help make things better.**



Affirming

Accurate and specific recognition of a person’s effort, strengths, values or skills can broaden a sense of self. Acknowledge other aspects that are important to your loved one. This may include affirming strengths and values within their family, community, culture, language or other social structures.

Examples:

Generous	Faithful	Determined	Committed
Optimistic	Persistent	Focused	Ethical
Ambitious	Truthful	Assertive	Curious
Capable	Resourceful	Reliable	Confident
Open-minded	Fierce	Caring	Protective of loved ones
Loyal	Loving	Sensitive	Insightful
Hardworking	Creative		



Examples:

- I hear what you are saying. It takes a lot of strength to navigate what you go through.
- You really care about me and our family, and I am grateful for you.
- What you’re doing is hard work, and I see your commitment.



Questions

Ask questions with a spirit of empathy and appreciative inquiry. Open-ended questions encourage insight and more conversation. Closed-ended questions limit the range of responses to one or just a few words.

Examples:

<i>Closed-ended Question</i>	<i>Open-ended Question</i>
<input type="checkbox"/> Don't you know you're throwing your life away?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> How has this influenced your earlier thinking about finishing your degree?
<input type="checkbox"/> Will you call the social worker?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> What does support look like to you?
<input type="checkbox"/> Can't you get along with your ex for the sake of the kids?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> How do you see it, from your perspective?
<input type="checkbox"/> Are you willing to risk another overdose?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> How would you want me to respond if you are in crisis?
<input type="checkbox"/> Does your faith want you to hurt yourself?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Where does your faith fit in with this, if at all?
<input type="checkbox"/> Are you going to get help for your mental health?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> How can I support your mental health or overall health?
<input type="checkbox"/> Will you get help for the sake of the family?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> How can our family support you?

Perhaps your loved one often comes to you for advice. Or maybe you're an elder, caregiver or authority in your loved one's life and are used to telling them exactly what to do. A conversational approach that includes giving advice but still empowers the loved one is one in which you "sandwich" the advice between open-ended questions:



Ask: I have some suggestions, but first I'm wondering what you've been thinking about. Would you be willing to tell me?



Advice: It sounds like you've really been weighing the pros and cons of counseling. My advice was going to be that we try out that support group the case manager recommended.



Ask: What do you see as a next step?



Take Care of Yourself After the Conversation

- Be patient with yourself while practicing these new ways of communicating and relating to your loved one. It may take practice to not try to fix the situation or your loved one, or to speak in this open-ended way, without judgment.
- Conversations like this may stir up strong feelings related to how you think your loved one should behave or how they should get better. Take time away from your loved one to process the range of feelings that come up for you during these conversations (frustration, confusion, appreciation, gratitude, etc.).
- Pay attention to what you need to look after yourself. What supports can you explore to help yourself process supporting your loved one? Consider activities like talking to a trusted friend or family member, journaling, seeing a therapist, going to a family support meeting or talking to your faith leader.

Resources

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