FACING ADDICTION WITH HOPE AND UNDERSTANDING

How to Talk to Someone About Their Addiction Without Pushing Them Away

FAHU Research Desk

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All content grounded in peer-reviewed research and clinical evidence.

How to Talk to Someone About Their Addiction Without Pushing Them Away

Most families have had the conversation — or tried to. Often it ends the same way: in anger, in tears, in doors slamming, in silence that lasts for days. The person with the addiction feels attacked. The family feels unheard. Nothing changes.

This is not because the family said the wrong thing. It is because having a productive conversation about addiction requires a completely different approach than most of us have ever been taught.

Why the Usual Approach Fails

The instinct is to confront — to lay out the evidence, express the pain, demand change. This approach often backfires because:

- The addicted brain is wired for defensiveness when it perceives threat

- Shame is one of the most powerful triggers for substance use — a lecture that induces shame may accelerate using, not reduce it

- Ultimatums without follow-through train the brain to ignore future ultimatums

- Emotional overwhelm shuts down the prefrontal cortex — the exact region needed for the rational conversation you're trying to have

What Works Instead: CRAFT Communication Principles

The CRAFT (Community Reinforcement and Family Training) model has over three decades of research showing it helps loved ones enter treatment at rates far higher than traditional intervention or Al-Anon detachment alone. The communication principles at its core are:

1. Choose the moment carefully

Do not try to have this conversation when the person is intoxicated, in withdrawal, or in the middle of an argument. Wait for a calm, sober moment — even if those are rare. A five-minute window of genuine connection is worth more than two hours of confrontation that goes nowhere.

2. Use "I" statements

"You're destroying this family" puts someone on the defensive immediately. "I feel frightened when you don't come home and don't answer your phone" communicates the same reality without triggering the same wall.

The formula: "I feel [emotion] when [specific behavior]. What I need is [specific request]."

This is not just therapy-speak. It is neurologically effective. "I" statements keep the conversation from activating the threat-response center of the brain.

3. Be specific and behavioral

Vague accusations ("You always do this") are impossible to respond to productively. Specific behaviors ("Last Tuesday you missed your daughter's school play. She cried.") create real openings for honest conversation.

4. Acknowledge what is real

Addiction is not a choice, but it is also not an excuse. Acknowledging both — "I know you're struggling with something you didn't choose, and I also know you've hurt people you love" — is more honest and more effective than landing on either side alone.

5. Express love clearly and often

The research on what motivates change in addiction treatment is consistent: connection is protective. People recover when they have

something to recover for. Keeping love visible — separate from the anger and the pain — matters.

6. Know your bottom line

A conversation without any consequences is just venting. If you say "I cannot continue to live like this," be prepared for what that means. Not as a threat — as a statement of your own needs and limits.

What to Avoid

- **Arguing about whether they have a problem.** If you're in this conversation, they have a problem. Getting them to admit the label is rarely productive.

- **Threatening things you won't follow through on.** Empty threats reduce your credibility for every future conversation.

- **Having the conversation with an audience.** Large family confrontations — unless professionally facilitated — usually backfire.

- **Expecting one conversation to fix it.** This is a process, not an event.

When to Get Help

If the conversation is not possible — because it always escalates into violence, or because they refuse to engage — a therapist trained in CRAFT or a professional interventionist can help facilitate the process.

The goal is not to win an argument. It is to open a door.

Works Cited

Facing Addiction with Hope and Understanding — facingaddictionwithhope.com
Every source above is listed with a direct link to the original publication.