

WORRIED

A COMPASSIONATE GUIDE FOR
PARENTS WHEN YOUR TEEN OR YOUNG
ADULT MISUSES DRUGS AND ALCOHOL



SICK

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CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION	
2. SPOTTING SIGNS OF A PROBLEM	4
3. WHY SCARE TACTICS AND CRITICISM USUALLY BACKFIRE	7
4. THE POWER OF COMPASSION AND CONNECTION	10
5. TAKING CARE OF YOURSELF FIRST	12
6. JOINING FORCES WITH OTHERS	14
7. BEGINNING YOUR RECOVERY JOURNEY.....	15

HELLO

If you're reading this, you might be where I was several years ago - scared, angry, exhausted, and feeling so alone while your teen or young adult child (or someone close to you) is misusing or addicted to drugs or alcohol. It's a frightening place to be, and I'm so glad you took the step of requesting this e-book. I hope this information will give you some things to think about and bring about a sense of relief to know **you're not alone.**



How do I know this? My oldest son became addicted to prescription drugs and an extremely high-risk lifestyle, including dealing drugs and gang involvement, so I've been deep in the battle. For over five years, I lived each day blaming myself, wondering how I could help him, and during it all, I lost my sense of self, my happiness, and health.

If you're living in the confusing, painful place I was, my goal is to bring you hope and connection. Please check out all the services and resources offered by the nonprofit organization I co-founded, [Hopestream Community](#). We'd love to come alongside you right now.

Brenda Zane



Co-Founder, Hopestream Community

SPOTTING SIGNS OF A PROBLEM

Awareness is the first step toward positive change

As parents, we want to trust our kids. We want to believe they can handle new freedoms responsibly. But substance use can escalate quickly during adolescence and early adulthood as our kids individuate, move out, attend college or simply gain more independence. As caring, aware parents, we need to watch for changes in behavior that might be signs our child is misusing alcohol or other drugs.

I know how hard it is to accept that your child could be headed down an unhealthy path. I remember the shock and worry I felt when I received that first telltale phone call from the middle school with news that my son was caught with marijuana. But minimizing or even dismissing signs of escalating use might be increasing the potential risks for your child - which is why you're here. You care, you know something's not right, and you're putting in the work to figure out what to do. **That's a big first step.**



To help with the confusion of this situation, here are some common signs your teen or young adult may be slipping into unhealthy dependency:

- Withdrawing from your family life and losing interest in activities they used to enjoy
- Extreme mood changes like heightened irritability, drowsiness, excitability, or giddiness
- Secretiveness around new friends or evasiveness about where they're going
- Finding alcohol or drug paraphernalia in their room or car
- Decline in academic performance (sometimes hard to catch if they're away at college)
- Sudden changes in sleep habits or appetite; lack of energy and motivation
- Noticeable change in their hygiene or self-care, skin and dental issues, weight loss, appearing unkempt

Spotting these signs early and addressing them with compassion is critical. Criticizing, threatening punishments, or angrily demanding that your child "get their act together," tends to only isolate them further. They need your empathy, concern, and emotional support during this vulnerable time. **But how do you do that?**





Today's evidence-based approaches validate that instead of condemnation, parents need to offer active listening while holding back the judgment. Create a safe space where your child can share what's going on without fear of reprisal. Getting at the root causes of their unhealthy behavior is essential to start to find help and healing for them, and your whole family.

With compassion and education, you can intervene early when signs appear, and motivate real change through care, not coercion. Keep reading to learn ways to take a new, often refreshing approach to what's likely the most challenging adversity you face right now.

WHY SCARE TACTICS AND CRITICISM USUALLY BACKFIRE

Believe it or not, your child's behavior makes sense

When we realize our child is using substances in unhealthy ways, our instinctive response is often to criticize them, threaten punishment, issue ultimatums, or try to scare them straight. But these tactics almost always backfire, entrenching secrecy and resistance to change. These methods assume that someone uses substances due to a lack of willpower, bad judgment or poor moral character. Luckily we have science now that tells us none of these things is true.



Understandably, we get angry when we discover lies about a child's substance use or feel fear imagining catastrophic possibilities like long-term addiction, accidents or overdoses. However, expressing our intense feelings through emotional outbursts, criticism or ultimatums usually makes things worse, not better.

Why don't punishments and scare tactics work? What fuels problematic substance use in young people isn't a simple desire for the temporary thrill of being intoxicated. Often, it's an attempt to self-medicate and cope with much deeper needs and wounds like:

- Loneliness, social awkwardness or anxiety around peers
- Trauma or abuse they cannot process
- Feelings of failure to meet high expectations
- Grieving loss or absence of someone they love
- Chronic depression, anxiety and suicidal thoughts
- Sexual orientation and gender identity confusion



Think about your child's current substance misuse. What problems do you believe it's likely solving for them? Write a few down as a way to start developing understanding and compassion:

A large, empty rectangular box with a light beige background, intended for writing responses to the prompt above.



Our kids turn to substances when they lack healthier tools for navigating difficult emotions and experiences. Heightening their shame and isolation through criticism is unlikely to help them open up or heal. As a matter of fact, the more you push, nag and remind them of their missteps and mistakes, the further away they'll run.

Getting them professional help tailored to their unique situation is ideal. But first they need to feel safe being emotionally vulnerable with *you*. Keep listening, quieting your anger, focusing on being supportive, not shaming. Avoid labels like "loser," "addict," or "junkie," which reinforce low

self-worth; feelings that can perpetuate their use. With empathy and compassion, you, as a parent, have the power to motivate real change. The influence you wield in this journey is significant if you learn how to be strategic and use a mix of education, psychology and actions to move your young adult child toward healthier choices.

Your task is helping guide them back to safer use (or abstinence) and improved mental wellness, not proving how they've failed or threatening penalties which they may not have the skills to avoid. Be the listening ear, caring advocate and their safe and secure bridge back to a more balanced and healthy life.

THE POWER OF COMPASSION AND CONNECTION

When our children are struggling with substance misuse, one of the most constructive things we as parents can do is lead with compassion and connection, not criticism.



This empathetic approach is at the heart of **Community Reinforcement and Family Training** (CRAFT).

CRAFT is an evidence-based program with over 30 years of research showing it helps concerned family members motivate a loved one to accept help for problematic substance misuse. That may mean seeing a local counselor or therapist or participating in formal treatment. CRAFT trains parents in positive communication, self-care, healthy boundaries and rewarding good behaviors, so your young person ends up using intrinsic motivation to get better.

The philosophy behind CRAFT is that substance misuse is fueled by unhealthy rewards and few positive reinforcements. So families shift focus onto providing new rewards for sober, healthy behavior, expressing care, and rebuilding strained connections.

The opposite of addiction is not sobriety, it's connection.

- Johan Hari



CRAFT helps you become a safe harbor where your child can confide their struggles without fear of volatile reactions or punishment and rejection. We build trust through dependable love, then reinforce steps towards responsibility. Small progress earns caring, positive reinforcement - using less days than last week? That's positive. Agreeing to attend counseling or work with a mentor? Positive! Taking an Uber instead of driving high? That is something to positively reinforce.

Healing happens through consistent compassion, not coercion and shame. CRAFT trains parents to reward honesty with caring connection. We model healthy behaviors missing in our kids' lives like self-respect and care, honest communication, accountability and unconditional support. Again, these things don't usually come naturally, so if you feel like you've missed the boat, it's okay. It's never too late to begin a new way of being, acting, and responding to your child even though their choices and actions make you worried sick.



TAKING CARE OF YOURSELF - FIRST

You are the only one who can give your child a healthy parent

As parents trying to help a child struggling with substance misuse, one of the most vital things we can do is take care of our own mental and emotional health first. It's so easy to get caught up in fear and frustration, losing sleep, neglecting self-care, and putting our entire life on hold attempting to "fix" our child's situation.

But we can't guide anyone else into health when we're sinking into physical and emotional depletion ourselves. Running on fumes, we have little capacity left to model resilience or mindfulness. **Taking time for rest and renewal isn't selfish, it's wise stewardship and a gift to yourself and your family.**



Take a look at this list and notice any early warning signs that you're sacrificing self-care:

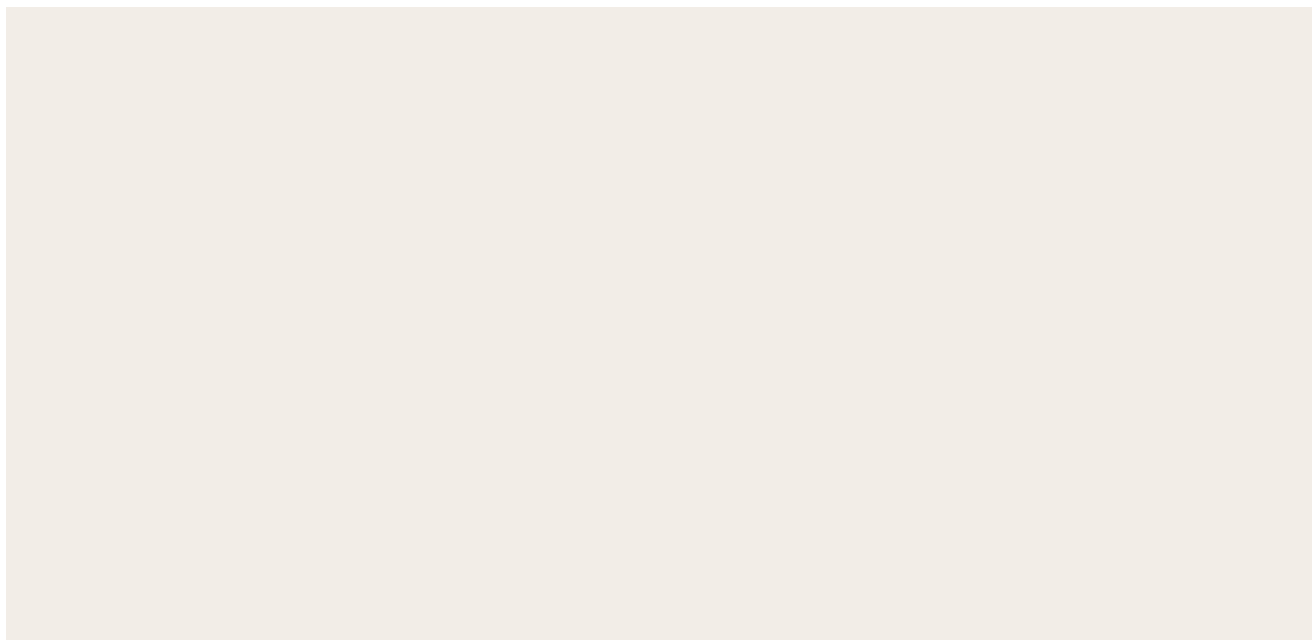
- Constant edginess, worry and feelings of panic or anxiety
- Obsessively tracking your child's every move
- Ruminating on the past and searching fruitlessly for reasons why your child is misusing substances
- Withdrawing from family and friends because you feel ashamed and exhausted
- Neglecting exercise and healthy food resulting in weight gain or loss
- Lack of consistent, deep sleep

When you recognize these patterns emerging, you can counteract them by:

- Confiding in trusted friends or family members about what you're facing
- Working with a counselor or therapist to process painful and confusing emotions
- Joining a local or online parent support community
- Finding a way to move your body regularly through simple exercises or activities
- Carving out time for hobbies and activities unrelated to your child's issues
- Letting go of guilt for "allowing" their substance use

Strengthening yourself equips you to compassionately and strategically motivate change. It might sound impossible, but if you can nurture and grow inner peace amidst the chaos, it can help lead your child out of their unhealthy relationship with substances. Pour into your cup first before trying to pour from an empty vessel.

Think about your current ways of coping with your stress, and how not taking care of yourself might be impacting your family:



JOINING FORCES WITH OTHER PARENTS & MENTORS

You don't have to do this alone

When we discover our child is struggling with substance use, it's easy to feel alone, ashamed, and overwhelmed. But surrounding yourself with others traveling this challenging road can provide incredible hope, wisdom and strength.

Finding other parents through local support groups, therapy, workshops and online communities lifts the veil of isolation. Listening to their uncannily similar struggles helps release misplaced feelings of parental guilt and shame. The empathy and advice shared amongst parents who truly “get it” will bolster you for the hard journey ahead.



Hopestream Community, a nonprofit organization I co-founded, is one resource that provides professional and peer education and mentorship grounded in the CRAFT approach and other evidence-based modalities.

We're a private, positive community equipping families to create change through science and kindness, not punishment and distance. We continually and lovingly point each other back to taking care of ourselves, healthy boundary setting and trusting in a purposeful process. Our moderated online groups, CRAFT sessions, therapeutic coaching, workshops, expert guest speakers, wellness content, and in-person retreats, help members find understanding, compassion, and strategies for creating change.

BEGINNING YOUR RECOVERY JOURNEY

You are an important part of the healing process

If you've made it through this guide, congratulations on taking the vital first steps to support your child on the journey of recovery from substance misuse. I hope you now have a better understanding of key principles like leading with compassion over criticism, the power of evidence-based approaches like CRAFT, and the critical importance of self-care so you don't burn out - which is exactly what your child doesn't need.

My goal in sharing this information is that you feel less alone and better equipped for the challenges ahead with your young adult child. But knowledge alone isn't enough. You'll often hear me say this is a marathon, not a sprint, so resilience and daily renewal of hope and compassion are needed to create conditions for positive change in your family.



The truth is, the change you want to see is likely to come in fits and starts. Ambivalence is a part of the process so don't get discouraged when you see your teen young adult child take three steps forward and two back - it's normal.

On dark days when you feel defeated and drained, come back to these core practices:

- Find a team of trusted friends or family who will support you through the ups and downs of this roller coaster ride
- Get connected in a safe, supportive and positive community group that will educate and encourage you
- Practice generous self-care so you have the strength and health needed for the journey
- Celebrate the small steps you all take forward while not trying to grasp at what's beyond your control

The best way to start is to start small and give yourself plenty of grace. Strengthening the bonds that have likely been broken by distance, lies and shame takes time. And through the lens of compassion and self-awareness, you can be a lighthouse for your child. Let go of blame and shame, lead with your heart, and know you are not helpless to help them.



YOU DON'T HAVE TO DO THIS ALONE

This challenge is too big to negotiate alone - you need support. The cost of isolating and trying to do it alone leads to burnout and depleted mental and physical capacity to approach your child with unconditional love and compassion. Isolation can delay you from seeking out the help your child, and entire family need right now.

When you tap into a community like Hopestream, you'll feel empowered by wisdom from families further down the path who model resilience, self-care, and healthy boundary setting. You'll also come to be a model for others as you work to create conditions for positive change in your family. When doubt, anxiety or shame creep in, you want a trustworthy tribe that lifts you up.

Be kind to yourself today, and remember you just took a big, positive step forward by reading this guide.



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