

🏠 / [Alcohol](#) / [Support Recovery](#) / Spouse

Living With an Alcoholic: How to Deal With an Alcoholic Spouse

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4 min read · 7 sections

🔍 Medical Detox 🏠 Evidence-Based Care 🔍 Expert Staff

If your significant other is struggling with an alcohol use disorder (AUD), there are actions you can take to help both you and your partner through the challenges posed by their compulsive drinking. You are not the cause nor cure of your significant other’s substance abuse issue but there are ways you can contribute positively to their recovery—and *your* own healing.

If you or your loved one is struggling with substance misuse issues and you aren't sure where to turn, reach out to AAC's helpline today at **(888) 676-1280** ⓘ

What you will learn:

- ✓ How to cope with a spouse with an alcohol use disorder (AUD) while finding ways to take care of yourself.
- ✓ Common behaviors of those with alcohol misuse issues.
- ✓ Phenomena you may experience while living with an alcoholic spouse.
- ✓ Treatment options for alcohol use disorder (AUD).

Jump to Section ▼

Impacts of Living with an Alcoholic Spouse

An [alcohol use disorder \(AUD\)](#) is a chronic medical condition characterized by an inability to stop or control drinking despite health, social, or professional consequences. The impact of an AUD isn’t always limited to the one suffering from this chronic medical condition. AUDs may affect not only the person with the drinking problem themselves, but also their family, their loved ones, and others around them.

Living with someone with an alcohol use disorder can trigger feelings of self-blame, attempts to control your partner’s drinking, and/or enabling behavior such as making excuses for their drinking. But as Al-Anon notes, you did not cause your spouse’s drinking—nor can you control or cure their drinking.¹

For each of these experiences, consider these alternative solutions:

- **Self-blame.** Rather than blaming yourself for your partner’s drinking, realize that they alone are responsible for how they handle their emotions and their recovery from an alcohol use disorder. If your loved one has an AUD, they have a chronic medical condition, and, like

🔥 Thinking about starting treatment? We're here to help.

1



- **Controlling your spouse's drinking.** Rather than obsessively monitoring your spouse's drinking behavior, keeping constant tabs on their whereabouts, attempting to discard their alcohol, lecturing them, forbidding them from drinking, or pleading with them to stop drinking, consider practicing the art of actively releasing control over your spouse's alcohol use. You did not cause their drinking, you cannot control it, and you cannot cure it.
- **Enabling your spouse.** Enabling involves behaviors such as covering or making excuses for your loved one. For example, someone who is enabling their spouse may call their spouse's workplace and tell their boss that their spouse is sick when they are actually intoxicated or hungover. Enabling can also be bailing your loved one out of jail for a DUI, minimizing the impact that the drinking has on your family, avoiding the issue, and/or pretending it does not exist. In time, you can learn to set healthy boundaries and follow through with consequences.

When you live with a spouse who has an alcohol use disorder, taking care of yourself is important. Although it may seem counterintuitive to focus on yourself first when your spouse may be showing worrisome addictive behaviors, it's critical to look at your own emotions and needs before you can take steps to help your spouse.

How to Help an Alcoholic Spouse

You can't cure your partner's alcohol use disorder for them. However, you can [provide information and support](#) to make it a bit easier for your partner to seek out their own recovery. Here are a few ways to support your partner.

- **Educate yourself.** One of the first things you can do is to educate yourself about substance use disorders, including the [diagnostic criteria](#), [withdrawal symptoms](#), [detox](#), and [treatment options](#). This knowledge can provide you with not only empathy for your partner's experience but also solid data to aid discussions and decisions.
- **Talk to your partner.** The [National Institutes of Health](#) suggest that you wait until your partner is sober and then calmly discuss your concerns about their drinking. During the discussion, consider providing some facts about the impact of alcohol on the body and mind as well as the various treatment options.²
- **Offer help.** Encourage your spouse to seek out counseling, treatment, group meetings, etc., and offer to connect them to these resources. Also consider suggesting activities the two of you can do together that don't involve alcohol.²
- **Consider an intervention.** While an [intervention](#) certainly isn't appropriate for all circumstances, it may be worth exploring. Various types of interventions and different approaches are available, and professionals can assist you with the process if necessary.

Get Help

Get in Touch With us via Text Support

Prefer texting to talking? We've got you covered 24/7. Receive 24/7 text support right away and at your convenience through our addiction text line.

[Sign Up For Text Support](#)

How to Talk to Your Spouse About Alcohol Use

Opening a conversation with your partner about their alcohol misuse can be tricky and uncomfortable. Plus, it may take several conversations before your spouse takes any action much less enters treatment. However, it's important to [talk to your spouse about alcohol](#), communicate the impact it's having on you and other family members and offer options for the individual to seek additional help.

The [Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion](#) (which is a division of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services) offers a few tips to aid these conversations.³

- **Prepare for the conversation.** First, find a good place and time to talk when you're both calm and can focus on the conversation. Practice



emphasize that things *can* get better and that you believe in your partner's ability to change.

- **Be specific.** List specific reasons for your worry and make concrete suggestions. Aim for something like "I'm worried about your drinking because I've noticed you're missing work and are spending less time with the kids." Or consider direct suggestions such as "Can we try to do more things together that don't involve drinking such as going on a picnic or for a bike ride?"
- **Offer support and create a plan.** Again, you can't do the recovery work for your spouse. But you can offer support and ask how you can be of assistance as they progress toward drinking less and abstaining from alcohol. Consider making a list of goals to work on and set a date to talk again, see how it's going, and offer encouragement.

Find Drug & Alcohol Rehab Treatment Near You

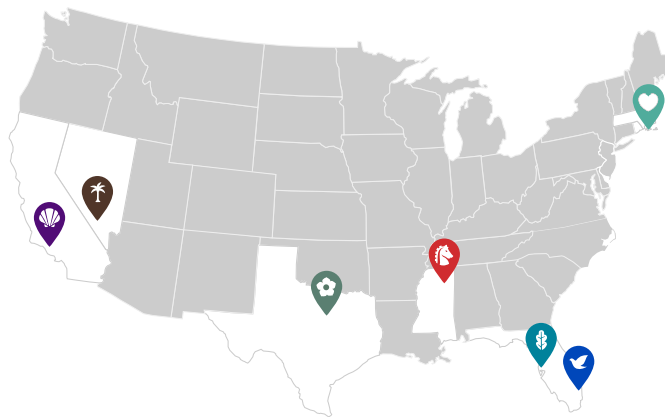


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How to Cope with an Alcoholic Spouse

Coping with an alcoholic spouse is a dynamic process—one that is more of a journey than a recipe. What helps you in one moment or scenario may be different from the next, so it's important to have a variety of coping methods in your personal toolkit. Some things you can do to help yourself cope with the experience of having a spouse with an alcohol use disorder include:

- **Seek out peer support groups**, such as [Al-Anon](#), which was founded to help families of people who abuse alcohol. In Al-Anon, you can learn coping skills that help you detach from your spouse's behaviors and [take care of yourself](#). These groups may help you respond to your spouse's drinking in a more constructive way while giving you the support of and connection with people who are going through something similar.
- **Self-care**, whether emotionally, physically, or spiritually, is key to your ability to cope. It might involve activities such as meditation, exercise, or new hobbies to pursue during this stressful time. Making time for and even prioritizing these activities can be beneficial.
- **Involve friends or family that help you feel more supported**. Be honest about what they can do to help and communicate this to them.² Remember that you're not in this alone.
- **Therapy** can be helpful for you to learn how to cope with a spouse that misuses alcohol. Research studies have shown that even when the spouse refuses to get help, family therapy can help you reduce stress and learn coping methods.⁴
- **Educate yourself** on what your partner is going through, what treatments may be available to them, and what resources they may be able to access when they're ready to get help. Being prepared for when they are ready to talk about their problem may make you feel more at ease.

Get Help

Help for Spouses of Alcoholics: Online Resources and Support

When your spouse or partner is misusing alcohol, it's important to see support from others, rather than going it along. The following resources may be helpful for yourself, your family members, and/or the individual struggling with alcohol misuse.

- [Adult Children of Alcoholics & Dysfunctional Families](#).
- [Al-Anon](#).
- [Alcoholics Anonymous \(AA\)](#).
- [American Addiction Centers](#).
- [Families Anonymous](#).
- [National Association for Children of Addiction](#).
- [Partnership to End Addiction](#).
- [Recovering Couples Anonymous](#).
- [Secular Organizations for Sobriety](#).
- [SMART Recovery](#).
- [Women for Sobriety](#).

If you're rather reach out to someone directly, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's offers a National Helpline via 1-800-662-HELP (4357). Calls are confidential, free, and answered 24/7, and operators can provide treatment referrals and information services (in English and Spanish) for individuals and families dealing with mental health and/or substance use disorders.

Treatment for Alcohol Addiction

Alcohol use disorders are chronic conditions, but many people benefit from treatment and ongoing recovery efforts. Treatment options vary in intensity of services, [length of treatment](#), and types of therapeutic interventions. Some of these treatment options may include inpatient treatment (such as residential rehabilitation), outpatient treatment, individual therapy, medications, and more.

Your partner may choose to attend some type of [rehab center](#) or employ some other therapeutic intervention for the treatment of their alcohol misuse issues at some point. If (or when) they do, you'll want to know what options are out there for the treatment of AUDs and what to look for in a treatment provider.



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Regardless of the type of treatment your significant other chooses, certain principles tend to make treatment more effective. These include:⁵

- **Treatment should be readily available.** When a person decides to go to treatment, you do not want to lose momentum and have them change their mind. As with many chronic disease processes, the earlier a person receives treatment for an alcohol use disorder, the greater the chance of positive treatment outcomes.
- **Treatment should be individualized.** No one type of treatment works for everyone.
- **Treatment should last an adequate amount of time.** Studies indicate that 3 months of treatment is needed to significantly reduce a person's risk of relapse.
- **Effective treatment should focus on numerous aspects of a person's life,** including work, family, and any legal issues they may have. It is also critical to have treatment that is tailored to a person's age, gender, culture, and ethnicity.
- **Treatment for AUDs ought to include behavioral therapies.** Behavioral therapy approaches are most commonly used in treating alcohol use disorders and other substance use disorders. This option helps them improve their relationships with others, find outlets that do not involve substance use, build skills that help them resist alcohol or drug use, and increase their ability to problem-solve.
- **Treatment plans at effective treatment centers are not static.** Instead, they are ever-changing, flexible, reactive, and proactive. For treatment to be optimally effective, clinicians should evaluate and revise a patient's treatment plan on an as-needed or routine basis.
- **Treatment should address any underlying mental health disorders to be optimally effective.** If your loved one has a co-occurring mental health condition, they may benefit from an integrated approach to treatment that simultaneously addresses both mental health and substance use issues.

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The course of your spouse's treatment will vary depending upon their exact issues and needs. Clinicians and patients consider various factors when determining the duration of treatment and what modalities will be used. Some people with alcohol use disorders are good candidates for [medication-assisted treatment \(MAT\)](#). Medications that are FDA-approved to treat AUD include:⁶

- **Acamprosate** can be used after a person has stopped drinking and wants to remain abstinent. Acamprosate can help to prevent drinking but may be less effective in people who continue to drink or use other drugs.
- **Disulfiram** can be used after someone completes alcohol detox or if they're in the early stages of abstinence. If a person uses alcohol while on disulfiram, he or she will have nausea, headaches, vomiting, and trouble breathing.
- **Naltrexone** can block some of the reinforcing effects of alcohol to help a person in recovery reduce their alcohol use.

To learn more about the treatment process and explore treatment options at one of American Addiction Centers facilities, reach out to an admissions navigator at [\(888\) 676-1280](tel:8886761280) . They can help you not only explore therapy options for your spouse and your entire family but also identify tailored treatment programs to meet the unique needs of your loved one.



Take Our Self-Assessment

Take our free, 5-minute "Am I an Alcoholic?" self-assessment below if you think you or someone you love might be struggling with an alcohol use disorder (AUD). The evaluation consists of 11 yes or no questions that are intended to be used as an informational tool to assess the severity and probability of an AUD. The test is free, confidential, and no personal information is needed to receive the result.

Self-Assessment: Am I Addicted?

Are you worried about yourself or a loved one?

Myself

Loved one

Begin Assessment

Disclaimer: Only a medical or clinical professional may diagnose a substance use disorder. This self-assessment is not a diagnostic tool and should not be used as such. The assessment may serve as an indicator of a potential addiction but should not replace a diagnosis from a professional treatment provider.

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Reviews of AAC's Alcohol Addiction Treatment Program



Justin, Oxford



Apr 19, 2024 [Rehabs.com](#)

I definitely recommend this facility to anyone seeking help for alcohol or drug addiction because if this place can help me like it has, then anyone can get the help they need. Please make the call because this is an amazing incredible place.

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JF, Oxford



Apr 08, 2024 [Rehabs.com](#)

Incredible amazing facility that gave me my life back. Highly recommend to anyone with alcohol or other drug addiction.



Tiff, Oxford



Mar 26, 2024 [Rehabs.com](#)

Alcohol basically destroyed my life but being in treatment here has shown me that there is hope for my future. This rehab is incredible. Love the nurses and TA's.

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About The Contributor



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- Recovery First Treatment Center

Mississippi

- Oxford Treatment Center

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