Supporting Someone Else's Drinking or Substance Use: A Programme for Family Members and Carers

THE TALKING THERAPIES UK SELF-HELP SERIES



Supporting Someone Else's Drinking or Substance Use: A Programme for Family Members and Carers

An eight-module programme, built on the evidence-based 5-Step Method, for anyone affected by a partner, parent, child, sibling or friend's harmful drinking or substance use

A self-help workbook · 8 modules · about 8 weeks

TALKING THERAPIES UK

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First edition, 2026.

This workbook accompanies the Supporting Someone Else's Drinking or Substance Use: A Programme for Family Members and Carers programme on the Talking Therapies UK self-help platform. Its text is drawn from the programme and is kept current with it: whenever the programme changes, the workbook is set again.

Revision 3. This printing was set on 21 November 2026 from the programme as it stood that day.

A note on using this workbook. It offers self-help based on established psychological approaches for difficulties of mild to moderate severity. It is not a substitute for assessment or treatment by a qualified professional and is not designed for use in a crisis. The examples in it are fictional; no real person appears in them. If you are worried about your safety, or your difficulties are getting worse, the page headed "When self-help is not enough" says where to turn.

Set in Poppins and Roboto, the Talking Therapies UK typefaces.

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How to use this workbook

It is well established in the research literature that for every person whose drinking or drug use has become harmful, at least one and often several family members are significantly affected by it, carrying a burden of worry, disrupted sleep, strained finances, damaged relationships, and chronic stress that is frequently invisible to everyone outside the household and often unacknowledged even within it. This programme is written entirely for that family member or carer, not for the person whose substance use is the cause of concern. If it is your own drinking or other substance use that worries you, the practice's separate programme, Understanding and Managing Harmful Drinking and Substance Use, is the right one; this programme is about you, your own experience, and what you can do for yourself, whatever happens with the person you are concerned about. This programme is built on the 5-Step Method, developed by Alex Copello, Lorna Templeton, Jim Orford and Richard Velleman, which the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence's guideline CG115 explicitly recognises by recommending guided self-help for families and carers once their own needs have been identified, and which has been evaluated across a substantial body of UK and international research as an effective structured response to exactly this situation. The 5-Step Method itself is usually delivered by a trained worker in person, in a single session supported by written materials, and this programme adapts its five steps, listening and understanding without judgement, providing relevant information, exploring your own ways of coping, exploring and strengthening your social support, and considering what further help might be useful, into a structured, self-directed course you can work through at your own pace. It is honest about what that adaptation can and cannot do: a page cannot listen to you the way another person can, and this programme signposts throughout to Al-Anon, Adfam, and other sources of live, human support alongside its own written content, rather than presenting itself as a substitute for them. The programme also draws on the Stress-Strain-Coping-Support model developed by Jim Orford and colleagues, which frames the family member's experience as a genuine form of chronic stress, producing real strain on physical and mental health, met by a range of coping responses that are all understandable even where some prove more costly than others, and buffered or worsened by the social support available; and on the Community Reinforcement and Family Training approach developed by Robert Meyers and Jane Smith, a well-evidenced framework for family members wanting to support positive change in someone they care about without resorting to confrontation or control. Who this is for. The programme is suitable for adult partners, parents, adult children, siblings, and close friends who are affected by someone else's harmful drinking or drug use and want structured support for their own wellbeing, their own coping, and, where relevant, how they might constructively encourage the person they care about towards change or towards help, without this programme asking them to control, fix, or take responsibility for another adult's choices. Who this is not for, and where to go instead. If it is your own drinking or substance use that is the concern, please use the practice's Understanding and Managing Harmful Drinking and Substance Use programme instead, which is written for exactly that. If you are a child or young person affected by a parent's or carer's drinking or drug use, this programme is written for an adult audience and is not the right fit; the National Association for Children of Alcoholics offers a free, confidential helpline and support specifically for children and young people in this situation, and young carers' services in your local area can also help. If your

situation involves any fear of violence, threats, controlling behaviour, or physical harm from the person whose substance use concerns you, this programme is not a substitute for domestic abuse support or safety planning, and Module 1 sets out clearly how to access that support first.

This workbook is the written form of the Supporting Someone Else's Drinking or Substance Use: A Programme for Family Members and Carers programme on the Talking Therapies UK self-help platform. It follows the programme module by module: each part of the book is one module, and each chapter is one piece of the module's teaching, set in the order the programme presents it.

Read the chapters of a part in order, then turn to the worksheets that follow them. The worksheets are the part of the work that changes things, so give them the time they ask for and come back to them as the weeks go on. You may copy or print the worksheets for your own use, as often as you need.

Most people work through one module a week, which takes the whole programme about 8 weeks. Go at the pace that suits you: a module done properly is worth more than two done quickly.

The check-in questionnaires let you see how things are changing. Complete each one when you reach it, note the date and your total, and compare it with the last.

When self-help is not enough

- If you are in danger now, or have seriously harmed yourself, call 999 or go to your nearest accident and emergency department.
- If you need help urgently but it is not an emergency, call NHS 111 or contact your GP surgery.
- Samaritans are there day and night, every day of the year: call 116 123 free from any phone.
- If you would rather not talk, text SHOUT to 85258 for free, confidential support at any hour.
- If your difficulties are getting worse as you work through this book, or you find yourself thinking about ending your life, stop and speak to your GP or a mental health professional. A workbook can be a good start, and some difficulties need more help than a book can give.

What this workbook will help you to do

- Understand who this programme is for and who it is not for, including the critical distinction between your own substance use and someone else's. Recognise the specific signs that mean domestic abuse support, rather than this programme, is the right next step. Describe your own situation honestly as a foundation for the rest of the programme.
- Understand the Stress-Strain-Coping-Support model and recognise your own strain as a real, measurable, and legitimate response to a genuinely difficult situation. Recognise common patterns of guilt and self-blame among family members and carers, and examine one such thought using a structured record. Give your own experience space on the page, in the spirit of the 5-Step Method's first step of listening without judgement.
- Understand the psychological mechanisms, reinforcement, tolerance, and self-medication, that maintain harmful substance use in the person you care about. Recognise and examine common myths about why people drink or use drugs and what makes them stop. Understand the stages-of-change model from the outside, and why a mismatch between your own readiness for change and theirs is a common and explainable source of distress.

- Understand the three broad coping styles identified in family-member research: engaged, tolerant, and withdrawal coping. Recognise these as understandable responses rather than character flaws, while understanding what the evidence shows about their typical costs. Locate your own current coping style honestly and identify where it may be costing you more than it is helping.
- Understand a boundary as a limit on your own behaviour rather than a demand on someone else's, and distinguish a genuine boundary from an ultimatum or threat. Understand the rationale for allowing natural consequences rather than shielding the other person from them. Build specific, personal boundary statements for your own situation.
- Understand why isolation is a common feature of this situation and why it tends to worsen strain over time. Know the main sources of formal support available, including Al-Anon and Adfam, and understand what each actually offers. Build a concrete, personal plan for strengthening your own support.
- Understand constructive, non-confrontational ways of raising concerns about someone else's substance use. Understand how positively reinforcing non-using behaviour differs from engaged coping or control. Recognise the specific signs that mean professional help is needed for the person you care about, beyond anything you can offer yourself.
- Recognise your own early warning signs of strain returning or boundaries slipping. Plan specifically for high-strain periods ahead. Write a complete, personal plan bringing together your own coping, boundaries, support, and approach to encouraging change, for maintaining your own wellbeing going forward.

PART 1

Understanding Your Own Situation

Making sure this programme is the right fit for you, and checking your own safety first

CHAPTER 1

Welcome to the programme

If someone you love, a partner, a parent, a child, a sibling, or a close friend, has a drinking or drug use problem that worries you, you are living with a particular kind of chronic stress that is both extremely common and remarkably poorly understood by people who have not lived through it themselves. You may be exhausted, frightened, ashamed, angry, guilty, or some shifting combination of all of these, often within the same day, and you may have had very little space anywhere to say so honestly. This programme exists to give you that space, along with structured, evidence-based support for your own wellbeing and your own choices, independent of what the other person decides to do about their own substance use.

This programme is built on the 5-Step Method, a well-evidenced UK approach developed specifically for people in your position, adapted here into eight modules you can work through in your own time: understanding and processing your own experience without judgement, learning about substance misuse itself so that some of the most common and most painful misunderstandings can be put down, examining your own ways of coping and what they cost you, building boundaries and looking after yourself, strengthening the support around you, thinking about how, if at all, you want to encourage change in the person you care about, and a final module on maintaining your own wellbeing for the long term, whatever happens with them.

Before any of that, this first module has two jobs that matter more than anything else that follows: making sure this programme, which is about you rather than about them, is genuinely the right fit for your situation, and making sure that if safety is a concern, you get to the right support for that first.

CHAPTER 2

This programme is about you

It is well documented in the research literature, going back to work by Copello and colleagues in the late 1990s and confirmed repeatedly since, that for every one person whose substance use becomes harmful, at least one and very often several other people are significantly affected by it, carrying real and measurable strain on their own physical health, mental health, finances, and relationships. This programme is written entirely for you, as one of those affected people, and it will not ask you to control, fix, cure, or take responsibility for another adult's drinking or drug use, because you cannot do any of those things, however much you want to and however hard you try. What you can do, and what this programme is built around, is understand your own situation clearly, look after your own wellbeing properly, and make informed, deliberate choices about how you respond, which is a very different and considerably more achievable task than making someone else change.

If it is your own drinking or drug use that is actually the concern here, rather than someone else's, this is the wrong programme for you; the practice's separate Understanding and Managing Harmful Drinking and Substance Use programme is written specifically for that situation, and is the better starting point. If you are a child or young person affected by a parent's or carer's drinking or drug use, this programme is written for an adult audience and assumes an adult's circumstances, choices, and responsibilities, which are genuinely different from a child's; the National Association for Children of Alcoholics, Nacoa, offers a free, confidential helpline specifically for children and young people in this situation, reachable on 0800 358 3456, and young carers' services in your local area can also help directly.

CHAPTER 3

Checking your own safety first

Substance misuse and domestic abuse are not the same thing, and most people living with a partner's or family member's harmful drinking or drug use are not experiencing domestic abuse. But the two do co-occur more often than either happening alone, and it is important to check this honestly before going further, because if abuse is part of your situation, the coping and boundary-setting skills later in this programme are not designed for that situation and could, in some circumstances, be unsafe to attempt without specialist support first.

Signs worth taking seriously include the person whose substance use concerns you becoming frightening, threatening, or physically intimidating, whether or not this happens only when they have been drinking or using; any physical violence, however it has been explained or excused afterwards; controlling behaviour such as restricting your access to money, friends, or your own movements; and a persistent feeling of walking on eggshells or being afraid of what might happen next in your own home. None of these require years of build-up or a dramatic single incident to count; a single occasion is enough to take seriously.

A NOTE

If any of the above describes your situation, please contact the National Domestic Abuse Helpline, run by Refuge, free and confidential, 24 hours a day, on 0808 2000 247. The Men's Advice Line, for male victims of domestic abuse, is on 0808 801 0327, and Galop, for LGBT+ survivors, is on 0800 999 5428. If you are in immediate danger, call 999. None of these services require you to have decided what you want to do next; they exist to help you think it through safely.

If there are children in the household and you are worried about their safety or wellbeing because of someone else's drinking or drug use, your GP, your child's school, or your local authority's children's services can advise on support available to the whole family, and Nacoa, on 0800 358 3456, offers support specifically for children and young people affected by a parent's drinking.

If you are experiencing thoughts of suicide or self-harm yourself, please contact the Samaritans on 116 123, available free and at any time, or call 999 if you are in immediate danger.

WORKSHEET

Sort each situation into the right route

Before describing your own situation, sort eleven short presentations into the three routes described above. Recognising the distinction in other people's situations builds the same discrimination skill you will need in looking honestly at your own, and getting this right matters because the wrong route can delay the help that would actually work, or in a situation involving abuse, could put someone at real risk.

This programme is the right fit for an adult family member, partner, or friend affected by someone

else's harmful drinking or drug use, with no indication of violence, threats, or controlling behaviour. Safety support is needed now wherever there is any fear of violence, actual violence, threats, or controlling behaviour, regardless of how long it has been going on or how it has been explained. A different route fits better where the substance use in question is actually the reader's own rather than someone else's, or where the person affected is a child or young person rather than an adult.

The groups: A This programme is the right fit B Safety support is needed now C A different route fits better

Write the letter of the group each item belongs to in its box.

☐ 1. A wife increasingly worried about her husband's escalating evening drinking over the past two years, feeling isolated and anxious, no violence or threats, wanting to understand how to support both him and herself

☐ 2. An adult son concerned about his elderly widowed mother's increasing wine consumption, worried mainly about her physical safety around the house, no violence or control of any kind

☐ 3. A partner whose boyfriend becomes frightening and controlling when he drinks, has gripped her arm hard enough to leave a bruise on one occasion, and who feels afraid of what might happen next

☐ 4. A partner who describes her husband smashing objects and shouting inches from her face during drinking episodes, never physically hit but constantly on edge and frightened in her own home

☐ 5. Someone increasingly worried about a close friend's weekend cocaine use, noticing the friend becoming distant and unreliable, no threats or violence, wanting to know how to raise it without damaging the friendship

☐ 6. Someone reading this programme who, on reflection, realises it is actually their own drinking that has become a worry, rather than anyone else's

☐ 7. A sister exhausted from repeatedly covering for her brother at family events and lending him money she knows will not be repaid, no safety concerns, wanting to stop enabling the pattern without cutting him off entirely

☐ 8. A fourteen-year-old whose father drinks heavily, looking for support for themselves

☐ 9. A husband worried about his wife's long-standing dependence on a medication originally prescribed for anxiety, now used in larger amounts than prescribed, no violence or threats, wanting to understand and support her towards help

☐ 10. A parent describing her son's escalating drug use alongside threats of violence towards family members whenever his use is raised, a genuine safety concern for the whole household

☐ 11. A partner noticing her boyfriend's drinking has crept up since he lost his job, feeling frustrated and unsure whether to raise it, no safety concerns, wanting a constructive way to bring it up

The answers are at the back of the book.

WORKSHEET

Describing your own situation

Take fifteen to twenty minutes and write an honest account of your own situation: your relationship to the person whose drinking or drug use concerns you, how long it has been going on, what has changed as a result for you personally, and whether any of the safety signs set out above apply to you or to anyone else in your household.

Then check what you have written against the three routes above. If anything you have written points towards safety support or towards a different route, please take that route; it is a sign this module has done exactly the job it was designed to do. If this programme is the right fit, Module 2 turns to the impact this situation has had on you specifically.

Describe your own situation honestly and check it against the three routes above.

CHAPTER 4

What you have done in this module

You understand that this programme is written for you, as someone affected by another person's drinking or drug use, and not for the person whose use is the concern; and you have checked your own situation honestly against the specific signs that mean domestic abuse support, rather than this programme, should come first. If you have reached this point and nothing in Module 1 has redirected you elsewhere, the next module turns to something this programme takes seriously throughout: the real impact this situation has had on you.

CHECK-IN

Mood check-in (PHQ-9)

Before you begin, take a few minutes to complete this short questionnaire. It is the same one used in NHS Talking Therapies and gives us a baseline against which to measure your progress over the programme.

Over the last 2 weeks, how often have you been bothered by any of the following problems?

	Not at all (0)	Several days (1)	More than half the days (2)	Nearly every day (3)
1. Little interest or pleasure in doing things	0	1	2	3
2. Feeling down, depressed, or hopeless	0	1	2	3
3. Trouble falling or staying asleep, or sleeping too much	0	1	2	3
4. Feeling tired or having little energy	0	1	2	3
5. Poor appetite or overeating	0	1	2	3
6. Feeling bad about yourself — or that you are a failure or have let yourself or your family down	0	1	2	3
7. Trouble concentrating on things, such as reading the newspaper or watching television	0	1	2	3
8. Moving or speaking so slowly that other people could have noticed. Or the opposite — being so fidgety or restless that you have been moving around a lot more than usual	0	1	2	3
9. Thoughts that you would be better off dead, or of hurting yourself in some way	0	1	2	3

Total: _____ Date: _____

Add up the numbers you have circled. A total of 0 to 4 suggests minimal symptoms of depression, 5 to 9 mild, 10 to 14 moderate, 15 to 19 moderately severe and 20 to 27 severe. Note your total and the date, so you can compare the next check-in with this one.

If you circled anything other than 0 for the last question, please talk to your GP or call NHS 111 today. If you are in danger now, call 999.

The PHQ-9 and GAD-7 were developed by Drs Robert L. Spitzer, Janet B. W. Williams, Kurt Kroenke and colleagues, with an educational grant from Pfizer Inc. No permission is required to reproduce, translate, display or distribute them.

CHECK-IN

Everyday life check-in (WSAS)

And one more short questionnaire about how things are affecting everyday life: work, home, social life, relationships and leisure. Functioning often recovers on a different timetable to symptoms, and it matters just as much.

This check-in uses the WSAS (Work and Social Adjustment Scale). If you are using the online programme, complete it there, where your scores are kept and compared for you. If you are working from this book alone, your GP or therapist can give you a copy.

WORKSHEET

Taking this forward

Before you move on, take two minutes to make this module harder to lose. Skills fade fastest in exactly the moments they are needed most, so the work here is to decide now, while things are steady, what you will reach for when they are not.

If things ever feel much worse rather than better, that is a signal to reach out rather than push on alone: use the messaging button to contact the practice, speak to your GP, or if you feel unsafe right now contact 999 or the Samaritans on 116 123.

Three short answers, in your own words. First: what single idea or skill from this module do you most want to keep? Second: when, realistically, will it be hardest to use, name the actual situation. Third: what exactly will you do in that moment? Write it as a sentence you could follow when stressed.

PART 2

The Impact on You

Understanding stress and strain using the Stress-Strain-Coping-Support model, and working with the guilt that so often accompanies it

CHAPTER 5

Your experience matters in its own right

It is easy, when someone else's drinking or drug use is the obvious problem in a household, for the family member's own experience to be treated, by other people and often by the family member themselves, as a side issue: something to be managed quietly while all the real attention goes to the person who is using. This module works directly against that pattern. Your own stress, your own strain on your health and wellbeing, and your own guilt, where it exists, deserve serious attention in their own right, independent of whatever happens with the other person, and this module gives them that attention using a well-researched framework built specifically for this purpose.

CHAPTER 6

Stress, strain, coping, and support

Jim Orford and colleagues developed the Stress-Strain-Coping-Support model specifically to describe the experience of family members affected by someone else's substance misuse, and it underlies the 5-Step Method this whole programme is built on. The model distinguishes four elements. Stress refers to the actual events and ongoing problems the substance misuse creates: unpredictable behaviour, broken plans and promises, financial strain, arguments, and the constant low-level uncertainty of not knowing what state the person will be in from one day to the next. Strain refers to the toll this stress takes on you specifically, and the research literature documents this toll consistently and in detail: raised rates of anxiety and low mood, disrupted sleep, physical symptoms such as headaches and digestive problems, and a corrosive social isolation, as embarrassment or exhaustion makes it harder to keep up ordinary friendships and activities. Coping refers to how you respond to the stress, which Module 4 examines in detail. Support refers to the formal and informal help available to you, which Module 6 addresses directly.

Naming your own strain accurately, using language like this rather than minimising it with phrases such as "I'm fine, it's not about me," is itself a meaningful piece of the work this programme is asking of you, not a detour from the real issue. Your strain is the real issue, every bit as much as the other person's substance use is.

WORKSHEET

Rate your own current strain

Rate how much strain you are currently experiencing in each area below. There is no score to pass or fail; the aim is an honest, current snapshot, which later modules will help you act on.

1. Sleep

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

0 = No strain at all *10 = Severe strain*

2. Mood and emotional wellbeing

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

0 = No strain at all *10 = Severe strain*

3. Physical health

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

0 = No strain at all *10 = Severe strain*

4. Work or daily responsibilities

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

0 = No strain at all *10 = Severe strain*

5. Social life and friendships

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

0 = No strain at all *10 = Severe strain*

6. Finances

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

0 = No strain at all *10 = Severe strain*

The end of the sample

This is a free sample of "Supporting Someone Else's Drinking or Substance Use: A Programme for Family Members and Carers", and it ends here.

Everything you have read here is from the opening of the book, set exactly as it is printed in it. The rest follows in the same way, chapter by chapter, with its worksheets, its examples and its reference list.

The full book is on sale in the Talking Therapies UK shop. A copy is yours to keep, as a PDF and an ebook, licensed to you by name: a short line saying so is printed at the foot of each page of the PDF and on the title page of the ebook.