

Coping skills

Managing emotions



Scottish Families
Affected by Alcohol & Drugs

The first step in managing emotions is to learn to identify and tune into our feelings and the feelings of others. Recognising and understanding our own emotions is important. Thinking about our emotions, rather than acting them out or avoiding them is healthy. Considering others' emotions, needs and wishes as well as having awareness of our own, can open up communication and improve relationships.

It is normal to experience a range of emotional responses when coping with a loved one misusing drugs. Emotions are real and powerful and some can feel unpleasant or overwhelming.

Some common emotional responses can include:

- **Guilt:** Because drug use is not acceptable to many, people can blame themselves for their loved one's choices. Remember, feeling guilty does not mean that you are to blame.
- **Shame:** This feeling can stem from the stigma around drug use. Family members may feel they cannot tell others and can feel isolated. Attending a family support group can help by meeting and talking to others in similar situations.
- **Fear and panic:** These can be paralysing feelings. Fear can result from anticipating the worst-case scenario and being overwhelmed with dread. People can panic when they feel overcome with anxiety and helplessness.
- **Anger and rage:** These feelings can surface when a crisis occurs. Anger is often expressed by blaming the drug user or other people. Anger often masks deeper feelings of fear, hurt or loss. Whilst anger is understandable, it can affect your relationship with your loved one if not handled carefully.
- **Sadness or grief:** People can experience sadness in relation to what can seem like lost opportunities such as the loss of hopes and dreams for a loved one, the loss of a relationship, or the loss of security and sense of well-being. Talking about these feelings can help.

Emotions come and go. Strong emotions often pass relatively quickly and it can be helpful to breathe deeply and slowly, giving yourself time to reflect on them and the thoughts connected with them. However, emotions can feed on themselves. For example, it's natural to reflect on better times, but constantly revisiting past memories can lead to low mood or progress to depression.



Emotions are important and valuable signals which give us information about what we need and what is important to us.

Helpful support can positively impact on the stress and strain of living with someone misusing drugs.

For information on available local support including family support groups, visit www.sfad.org.uk/get-help-now or contact our helpline on:

08080 10 10 11

helpline@sfad.org.uk

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Understanding your emotions

Before you can learn to respond to emotions in a helpful way, you need to be able to recognise what you are feeling, why you may be feeling this way and how you express it. This can allow you to act in a thoughtful way and avoid acting impulsively or acting without fully understanding why.

- Emotions rarely just happen out of the blue. Experiencing an emotion involves a sequence of events (see diagram). Something internally (e.g. your own thoughts) or externally (e.g. what's happening around you) prompts you to feel something.
- Most events don't automatically prompt a feeling: the feeling is prompted by how you interpret the event or situation.
- When you sense or feel an emotion, you are generally feeling a reaction in your body (e.g. tensing or relaxing muscles or your heart rate increases) and in your brain.
- When you feel an emotion, not only can you vocalise it (e.g. I'm angry, I love you), you can express it through body language (e.g. facial expression), and actions (e.g. yelling, kissing).

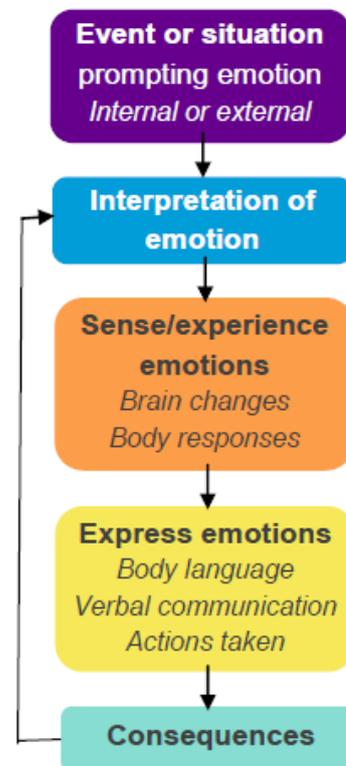
Managing your emotions

Feelings have to go somewhere. You can let them out, hold them in or ignore them. Letting them out is a healthier response. Holding them in or taking them out on someone else can result in stored up anger, resentment, and low mood.

Suppressing or denying feelings can be problematic. It is best to acknowledge them and deal with them in an honest way. Even if feelings are negative or painful, it's better to let them out.

When communicating your feelings, use a neutral tone. Use 'I' statements, such as, 'When you...(their behaviour), I felt...(your feeling)' rather than, 'You made me angry because...'. This allows you to express your feelings without accusing or attacking your loved one.

It's important to acknowledge other people's feelings as legitimate and valid. Although you may feel differently about a situation, the other person's feelings are real. If you invalidate their feelings, it can intensify or aggravate the situation.



Understanding emotions

By learning to observe your emotions, you learn to distance yourself from them so that you can think and use coping strategies appropriate to the situation rather than acting impulsively.

Emotions are a form of communication.

Knowing how to express your emotions allows you to communicate more effectively with other people.