



## Tough Love

Tough love in the context of addiction is an expression used when someone treats another person harshly or sternly but with honesty with the intent to help them in the long run. In most uses, there must be some actual love or feeling of affection behind the harsh or stern treatment to be defined as tough love. For example, genuinely concerned parents refusing to support their drug-addicted child financially until he or she enters drug rehabilitation would be said to be practicing tough love ([wikipedia.org](http://wikipedia.org) definition).

Alcoholism and drug addiction are often seen as moral failings and evidence of a weak character lacking self-control. People suffering from these illnesses are seen as “drunks” or “drug addicts”. The automatic sympathy that would be extended to someone with a physical illness may not be there for a person who is battling addiction. When people are suffering from alcoholism or chemical dependency, they are sick and need help. Alcohol and drug addiction have long been accepted as a disease and is a treatable disease but often this is not understood. Everyone may feel sorry for people who are in trouble, but no one wants to work next to, or rely on, someone who is impaired. But how do we deliver that help effectively when all previous attempts seem to have fallen on deaf ears.

Often **family members** are exhausted from trying to get their loved ones to see the affect their drinking or using is having on the family. Through exasperation or frustration they have resorted to confrontations which can lead the alcoholic or addict to feeling punished for their behaviour. Consciously or unconsciously they regard themselves as needing punishment but this can momentarily alleviate their guilty feelings and enable them to live more comfortably with their addiction. They continue to avoid the problem by indulging in self-pity and resentment. Alternatively family members may adopt the Sympathetic approach. This might make the spouse feel less persecutory but the effect on the alcoholic or addict is to reduce their anxiety level about the problem. The alcoholic or addict is able to live with his/her drinking less painfully and therefore less realistically. Both approaches delay the moment of truth that only the right sort of intervention can achieve. Such intervention is most effective when it involves people who are significant to the addict such as family, their employer or close friends.

For families in which one member is an alcoholic or otherwise **chemically dependent**, there are two major problems:

Identifying the problem as alcohol/drug dependency; addiction is a great master of disguise.  
What can family members do that will really help?

There is still a belief that the illness of addiction should be allowed to progress until the individual acknowledges that he or she needs help – until they reach their ‘rock bottom’. This delay is not only unnecessary but potentially dangerous. Unless the destructive process is interrupted successfully, the

result could be permanent physical and psychological damage, loss of career, family and friends and even premature death.

Whilst we may think "It's not my problem" the reality is addiction is a family illness. Claudia Black in her DVD 'Addiction and the Family' describes alcohol and drugs being like dominos, "they knock down the person who uses them, and that person knocks down everyone else around them. While alcohol and other drugs take an incredible toll on the abuser, they also take an incredible toll on the family". Ask yourself honestly:

- Have you ever called in sick for your loved one because of alcohol or drugs?
- Have you ever lied to cover up for their drinking or using?
- Have you ever bailed them out of jail or paid their legal fees?
- Taken on the blame for their drinking or using?
- Avoided talking about it for fear of the response?
- Have you ever loaned them money which has been used for alcohol or drugs?
- Have you ever given them one more chance, and another, and another?
- Have you ever threatened to leave but didn't?

If you are not able yet to answer 'yes' to one or more of the above questions the chances are you soon will unless the addiction is arrested. The problem is by continually supporting the drinker or user (controlling their behaviour) because of love or fear of the consequences you are enabling the behaviour to continue and this must stop if there is to be any chance of recovery for the addict or alcoholic and just as importantly for the family members. But it is not an easy task to stop the enabling behaviour because of the fear of the consequences also on the family. This may be particularly the case when the fear of losing a job will also have a domino effect on loss of income and therefore loss of home. In difficult economic times this may be uppermost in family member's minds but honesty with the employer often leads to the job being saved if the family member seeks help for his problem. Continuous absence or being intoxicated on the job, the inevitable consequence because of the progressive nature of addiction, would certainly lead to dismissal.

It is vital to the process of recovery that you, the family member, recognises that you cannot control anyone's addiction (in the words of [Al-anon](#), the fellowship for family members of alcoholics, you are powerless over someone else's addiction). Until you do you will remain controlled by the disease of addiction.

Research has shown that the only way that a family member can intervene in a loved one's drinking or using is by practising 'Tough Love'. By recognising the enabling behaviour and committing to non-enabling behaviour despite the consequences there is a chance of recovery for the alcoholic or addict as well as the family members. It is called 'Tough Love' because we make the changes to stop enabling because of our love for the user and because it is extremely difficult to make these changes. Sometimes we find it difficult and need to get support. In fact it is vital that support is sought particularly from other family members and close friends. It is vital that family members and close friends no longer:

- Cover up for the family member's absence from work or missing important social engagements
- Excuse them for their drinking or using. For example "He has had a stressful day"
- Threatened them and not follow through. It is vital that the alcoholic or drug abuser realises that the message they hear can no longer be dismissed. Do not threaten to walk out if you know you will not do it.
- Avoid talking about the issue. Choose the right moment which is often the morning after heavy drinking or using when they are relatively sober. Talking to a 'drunk' or to someone who is 'high' is often pointless as it will be forgotten because of blackout when they sober up.

It is important to remember that we are dealing with an illness that kills. Alcohol is the third highest contributor to premature death in the western world but it is a treatable illness. Emotional pain now is better than the pain of grief that may come later.

It may also be necessary to seek professional help and as we progress in the delivery of addiction more resources become available. Today the use of **Interventionists** is becoming more prominent.

A structured intervention is a collaboration of people and resources and is facilitated by a qualified Interventionist. It is methodical and can be lengthy. It requires time and commitment. Successful intervention means penetrating the chemically dependent individual's substantial wall of defence. The person or persons involved should prepare themselves with factual data concerning the individual's behaviour whilst they are abusing alcohol and/or drugs. More details can be found in our '**What is an Intervention**' leaflet.