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How Empathy Can Support Someone In Recovery

Supporting someone who is recovering from addiction can be really tough. Knowing what to say or do to help them feel supported and loved is not always easy. At times, you might feel scared, confused, or even frustrated. However, one of the best things you can do is to be patient and understanding with yourself and them and embrace empathy as a powerful tool to help everyone throughout the process. Recovery takes time and doesn't tend to follow a straight line. Moving forward is still a step in the right direction, no matter how small or insignificant something feels.

This article will explore empathy as a way to offer invaluable support to individuals who are navigating a path toward addiction recovery. Cultivating empathy and keeping it at the forefront of all interactions, even in the most challenging circumstances, can help with healing for everyone.

What is empathy and what role can it play in addiction recovery?

Empathy is the ability to understand and share the feelings of another person. It goes beyond feeling sorry for someone -- that would be more of a demonstration of sympathy. Instead, empathy focuses on genuinely connecting with them emotionally. Empathy comes from within. We use kindness, guidance, and strength to "perceive and understand the internal experiences of someone else...to accurately peer into their reality."¹ When you show

empathy, you allow yourself to see the world from another person's perspective, which can make a huge difference in how you support someone recovering from addiction.

Types of Empathy

There are several types of empathy, each playing a role in connecting us with other people's experiences and emotions. Understanding the various types of empathy allows us to be more effective when we offer support to someone by making them feel more comfortable and receptive to help.

Cognitive empathy is understanding another person's thoughts, perspectives, and experiences. We imagine what someone else might think or feel, often referring to it as walking in someone else's shoes.²

Emotional empathy is when you allow yourself to feel the emotions that another person is experiencing and become affected by their emotional state. For example, if they cry, you "might begin to feel sad too" and as a result, you share an emotional connection with them.³

Compassionate empathy, also known as empathetic concern, is about sensing what another person needs from you and being compelled to take action because you are motivated to help someone however possible, based on your emotional connection with them.⁴

Affective empathy is understanding and sharing “in another person’s emotions without being emotionally stimulated yourself.”⁵

Somatic empathy is a physical reaction to what someone else is experiencing based on what you perceive them to be feeling. For example, your cheeks might blush if you notice someone else feeling embarrassed.⁶

Why Empathy Matters in Addiction Recovery

Addiction can be a very isolating experience. People struggling with addiction often feel alone, misunderstood, and judged. When someone shows empathy towards them, it can help break down these feelings of isolation and create “a sense of belonging and acceptance.”⁷ Empathy communicates to the person in recovery that they are not alone and that someone cares about what they are going through, which, in turn, can build trust, translating into a willingness to get help.

Shame is commonly something that someone with an addiction can feel. It could be that they are ashamed of their behaviour, their inability to stop using substances, or the impact their addiction has had on their loved ones. Empathy helps to counteract this shame by providing a safe, non-judgmental space for them to express their feelings and struggles.

Cultivating Empathy

Empathy can be a powerful tool for repairing relationships affected by addiction. Cultivating empathy is crucial, not only for the person in recovery but also for their loved ones and carers, to avoid developing compassion fatigue. Practicing compassionate empathy, which inspires action and keeps emotions intact but controlled, reduces the “danger [that] people are more likely to opt out of empathy if it feels cognitively or emotionally taxing.”⁸ That practice involves being willing to learn how to be empathetic, especially if it seems to be something that doesn’t come naturally. Watching films or reading about other’s experiences is an excellent way to develop better awareness and understanding of differences in the world between people and cultures through storytelling. It can inspire questions and exploration that help you understand your biases, viewpoints and assumptions and enable growth.

How to develop empathy

You can begin to practice empathy by starting with these three things:⁹

1. Self-reflection

Think about your feelings, reactions, and experiences to better understand what may be clouding your ability to empathize with what someone in recovery might be going through.

2. Listen to understand, not respond

Concentrate fully on what someone is saying to avoid passively hearing their words and thinking of what you will say in response. Let them share and lead the conversation, keeping your opinions and ideas of what you believe the experience of living with addiction is to yourself.

3. Focus on quality time

Build stronger emotional connections, respect, and understanding as part of developing empathy by moving closer to those with addiction to understand, destigmatize, and humanize their experiences. Participate in support groups and learn from others who share their stories of recovery.

Acknowledging the effect addiction has on loved ones and carers

Addiction doesn’t just affect the person using substances; it also deeply impacts their family members and loved ones. They often experience challenging emotions, including fear, confusion, anger, and helplessness. It’s important to acknowledge these feelings and understand that offering support and care can be very difficult. Recognizing addiction as a disease rather than a moral failing can help develop empathy, reduce feelings of blame, and diminish stigma. This perspective shift will create a more supportive environment for the person in recovery and their loved ones. The recovery process is “unique to each person” and recognizes that there will be setbacks along the way.¹⁰ When you support someone through recovery with empathy, you are focused on reconnecting with them and your relationships, helping them redevelop skills that will help them find their path in life and recognize opportunities that exist in the community. You’re offering them optimism, hope and belief when they may not feel they have enough of their own to carry them forward.

Being kind to ourselves

Consider how these three actions can help you develop empathy and compassion:

1. Avoid self-criticism by understanding that feeling overwhelmed and making mistakes is normal.
2. Let go of resentment by learning to forgive yourself and others.
3. Embrace your own and others’ imperfections to develop a more compassionate perspective.

How family therapy can help

Family therapy can play a significant role in helping empathy surface. This can often kickstart the healing process for everyone involved. It offers a facilitated environment where it is safe to express feelings, understand each other's struggles with recovery, and offer support without confrontation. Empathy is at the foundation of family therapy helping reduce feelings of isolation and break down the stigma surrounding addiction. By promoting transparency and understanding and embracing empathy as a powerful tool, family therapy can help loved ones better support the person in recovery and help them heal relationships along the way.

Tools and resources to consider

Exploring ways to help develop compassion and empathy as part of your daily life can start with small things such as:

- Reading books on empathy and addiction recovery to gain insights.
- Joining support groups for families who can speak to shared experiences and coping strategies.
- Individual therapy for yourself and other family members can help you manage your own emotions and develop better empathy for your loved one as they recover.

Empathy is a powerful way to support someone through addiction recovery. It helps to break down feelings of isolation, counteracts shame and insecurities, and provides a safe space for everyone involved to express their struggles. When you practice active listening, validating feelings, asking open-ended questions, being patient, and educating yourself about addiction, you can offer invaluable support to someone on their recovery journey. Remember that empathy benefits the person in recovery and you as a supporter by reducing stress and improving relationships and personal growth. While practicing empathy can be challenging, it is vital to help recovery move forward.

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