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## When Your Spouse is Addicted: How to avoid enabling and get to reality

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Robert Downey Jr. is one of the world's highest paid actors known for his blockbuster roles and ability to mix comedy and drama in a riveting fashion. However, Marvel Studios initially refused to cast him in his best-known role of *Iron Man*, because of his history of uncontrolled addiction. Downey started smoking marijuana at age eight with his father, and became entangled in the fast and unhealthy lifestyle of a teen actor. Although his talent was prodigious, his work became erratic and his addiction led to dangerous behavior, including drunk driving, weapons, and a dazed night entering a neighbor's house and falling asleep naked in one of the children's beds. Eventually, he was arrested and imprisoned in 1999.

Although he was in and out of rehab many times, it took several more years of treatment until 2003, when Downey stayed clean for good. There were many factors in his recovery, but he gives special credit to his second wife, Susan Levin Downey.

Addiction can be especially brutal on marriage. Spouses often feel helpless watching the one they love self-destruct, and they also feel angry about their partner's deception and betrayals. When addiction strikes marriage, spouses need to face the reality and be careful not to become an enabler.

### **The Chains of Addiction**

Addiction manifests in a variety of ways, from the most severe heroin junkie, to the compulsive spender. It can include drug or alcohol dependence, compulsive pornography use, gambling, obsessive eating, lying, toxic relationships, or even Netflix. When does a habit become an addiction? Any behavior can begin as pleasure or escape, but in the case of addiction, the actions become demands. Addictions are secretive habits the person has unsuccessfully tried to stop, and that have disrupted work and home. An addiction takes an outsized role in the addict's life and affects those they love.

### **The Hard Truths of Addiction**

Addiction is embarrassing. It is easier to hide addictive behaviors than admit them, and the layers of denial build up until the truth is completely lost. Cravings overpower reason, and getting a fix becomes more important than being honest. This is why 12-step programs like Alcoholics Anonymous begin with overcoming denial. As author Stephen King writes, "[Addicts] build defenses like the Dutch build dikes." King knows this from his own years of alcohol and drug use. It wasn't until his wife and family confronted him with a garbage bag of evidence (beer cans, cocaine spoons, cigarette butts, Valium, Xanax, Rofitussin, and mouthwash bottles), that he faced the truth.

Loved ones get caught in the same kinds of fog as their addicted spouses. It is easier to ignore warnings (*she keeps coming home late plastered*), or deception (*that story just changed again*) than have difficult conversations, but this avoidance leaves problems free to grow.

### **Enabling Addiction**

Of course, spouses should have compassion, but sometimes giving the benefit of the doubt can be like putting one's head in the sand, and bailing someone out can dig them deeper into a hole. If a spouse is making excuses for their loved one, giving them money against their better judgment, or taking on extra responsibilities for them, they are likely enabling. Rather than heal the addict, enabling worsens the addiction.

Some spouses enable out of a need to be a savior, but this belief of "If I am a good enough, I can save my spouse," may be more about being a martyr or hero than it is about helping. In this case, the enabling can itself become addicting. Literally, one becomes co-dependent, or dependent on the need to help, to feel good. Of course, many who enable are not doing it for their own benefit but are desperate to cope and find answers.

What can be done to avoid enabling an addicted spouse and help them recover?

### **Choosing Honesty and Setting Boundaries**

A key to avoiding enabling is being honest and facing reality. Stephen King's wife and family had the hard conversation about their concerns, backed with evidence. This prevented minimization and excuses. When something is wrong, it needs to be brought up in a clear and loving way, and not swept under the rug.

Another key is to set [boundaries](#), which may include expectations of abstinence, treatment, and recovery groups. In Robert Downey Jr.'s case, his wife, Susan insisted that he give up drugs completely, and if he didn't, she would leave. This may not be realistic in every case, since relapse is often a part of recovery, but there needs to be an active recovery program and agreed-upon plan. Structure is part of recovery, and commitment from both is essential. If either are making excuses, making questionable choices, or avoiding certain topics, it is a time to return to reality.

### **A Healthy Recovery**

A healthy recovery includes healthy living, and this is important for both spouses. Robert Downey Jr. attends 12-step programs and therapy, and practices yoga and meditation. But even if the addict isn't choosing recovery, self-care is important for the spouse. Some find support through church groups, therapy, and Al-Anon meetings, all of which can be done regardless of whether the addicted spouse is getting clean.

Ideally, both the addict and his or her spouse work together on wellness, which becomes a lifestyle that supports the recovery and strengthens their marriage. In one of my research projects, we found that when couples chose sobriety, they made dramatic improvements in their relationships, and some even stopped being violent.

Regardless of where the recovery is at, love is a powerful tonic that strengthens couples in their journey through addiction. "Whatever I was hungry for when I met Susan," Downey [said](#) in an interview. "I couldn't have known how much more satisfying what I got would be." True love includes honest conversations and high expectations, which help couples grow toward a healthy life together.

*This post also appeared on the [Institute for Family Studies](#)*

#### References:

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