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Dealing with a brother addicted to heroin ^[1]

Dear Alice,

I'm hoping that you can help!! My brother, who is 35 years old, is a heroin addict. He has taken his whole family for a roller coaster ride with this drug. WE all want off the ride — he uses the family when he needs us, just to return to this disgusting drug.

The type of heroin that he is addicted to is called Black Tar heroin. I am not sure how he takes it but I think he smokes this stuff. My family (including myself) has given up on him. Last year my sister let him live with her for a whole year while he went through a rehab (methadone) program. It was probably the hardest thing she ever did, to see him go through all the pain and withdrawals, etc. But she stuck by him through it all. The whole family at one time or another has supported him financially, as well as mentally. Then we all watched him turn around and go right back to this disgusting drug.

As a family, is it best just to totally cut him out of the picture? Do we let him hit the bottom with nowhere to turn? It seems we have tried everything else! The drug always turns out to be the important thing! I almost wish he would get busted and sent to jail, I bet that might work.

Any suggestions would be helpful and very much appreciated.

Thank you,
Heroin Hater

Answer

Dear Heroin Hater,

Seeing a loved one struggle with addiction can be difficult and stressful, whether or not you live under the same roof. You may not be able to help your brother get off heroin, but you can come to terms with what his addiction means for the rest of you. As challenging as it may be, try to keep your brother's addiction in perspective. His addiction to heroin is an illness. It's likely his actions are influenced more by his addiction and not out of a desire to intentionally hurt you or other family members. On one hand, this doesn't mean you have to give him money or shelter every time he asks. On the other hand, you might not need to cut him out of your life completely.

Finding a balance between these two extremes could be your goal. Above all, remember that you and your other family members also deserve support as you decide how to best help your brother.

The next steps for your family may involve figuring out changes that can help you all better cope with this tough and painful situation:

- **Learn everything you can about addiction.** The more you understand about addiction, the more you'll be able to help your brother and understand the struggles he is experiencing.
- **Don't expect that the addiction will heal itself.** Those who struggle with addiction will only get better with help. Having support, treatment, and coping skills are all crucial in recovering from addiction.
- **Recognize that recovery is an ongoing process.** This will not be a quick process, and maintaining a commitment to getting help for your brother and your family will help show that you are invested in his long-term health.
- **Avoid making excuses for his behavior.** He needs to be held accountable for his actions. Additionally, avoid shielding him from consequences brought on by the addiction. It may be hard, but it could help him realize he needs to make a change.
- **Avoid talking or arguing with your brother while he is high.** Wait until he's no longer high in order to try having a conversation.
- **Remember, this isn't your fault!** Don't feel guilty about his behavior — he's responsible for his own actions.

List adapted from the [National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence](#) [2].

Even with these tips, your family might also need additional support. You could try talking with a mental health professional who can help you identify options your family can take in your relationship with your brother. They can also provide an objective point of view, as well as support and encouragement — help you may not get from other family members who are as entrenched in the situation as you. You could also think about attending [Nar-Anon](#) [3] meetings, which are geared toward providing support and resources for family members of those suffering from an addiction. At the end of the day, you may not have control over your brother's behavior, but you do have control over your response. Be sure to practice self-care and seek out additional support if you need it!

Good luck!

Alice!

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