

Why Loved Ones of Opioid Addicts Should Join a Support Group

Letting go of shame and maintaining hope are key, experts say.

By [Ruben Castaneda](#), Staff Writer | March 27, 2017, at 9:00 a.m.



The nationwide opioid epidemic has prompted loved ones of addicts to form support groups (GETTY IMAGES)

Inside a nondescript local government office meeting room in southern Maryland, Paige, a 26-year-old recovering [heroin](#) addict, sat at a table with 11 parents and two sisters of [opioid junkies](#) and bluntly told them the self-destructive behaviors of their loved ones weren't their fault.

"My parents could have done nothing different to save me," Paige said, her voice cracking. Her eyes welled, her voice trembled. Someone pushed a box of tissues to her. Paige dabbed at her eyes and continued: "There was nothing they could have done to stop me from being an addict. They love and loved me very much. I just wanted to get high, and anyone who got in my way was collateral damage. I started at age 12 with weed and drinking. I could give you a million reasons why; they'd all be b.s." (Note: Paige asked that her full name not be published because she has a government job and her co-workers are unaware of her addiction.)

Paige, the guest speaker at a support group meeting for loved ones of opioid addicts, concluded, and the other people in the meeting promptly talked of the panoply of horrors their junkie kids or siblings have put them through. One woman, 73, described how police officers crashed into her home three times while investigating her [addict son](#) – now serving a 30-year prison sentence – for illegal drug activity. At the last raid, a SWAT officer plucked her infant granddaughter from her crib. A teenage girl spoke in a halting voice about how her addict older brother stole money she was saving to donate to a heart association. Some parents spoke of their fear their child would [overdose](#).

Deep Emotions

The raw emotion ricocheting through the room was typical of the monthly meetings held by Parents Affected by Addiction. “The purpose of our group is to allow parents and other relatives to cry and hug, and most importantly, not be judged as a bad parent or bad family member,” says Amy, the woman who organized PABA in 2013 and asked that her full name not be published because her husband has a sensitive government job.

The opioid epidemic that’s raging across the country has prompted loved ones of [addicts](#) – parents, grandparents, siblings and others – to form support groups like PABA. These groups aren’t the same as Nar-Anon or Al-Anon, long-established support programs for loved ones of addicts and alcoholics, respectively. Those groups recommend a spiritual approach based on the 12 steps of Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous and hold meetings that typically last an hour to 90 minutes. PABA says nothing about the 12 steps. Its March meeting was scheduled to last for 90 minutes, but it broke up after nearly two hours. Al-Anon and Nar-Anon meetings are “great, but they’re very structured,” Amy says. “A lot of us, parents and grandparents, need more than five minutes to share.”

Fear and Hope

The different groups are alike in that they all provide a place for loved ones of people suffering from substance abuse to gather and share fears, frustrations and glimmers of hope with each other, which helps them realize their troubles aren’t unique. “It’s amazing how alone we can feel when we don’t know others are struggling with the same thing,” says [Deni Carise](#), chief clinical officer at Recovery Centers of America, which has substance abuse rehabilitation centers in three northeast states.

Increasing numbers of families are grappling with the opioid epidemic. In 2015, drug overdoses driven by opioids – including heroin, which is illegal, as well as [prescription pain relievers](#) such as oxycodone, hydrocodone, codeine, morphine and [fentanyl](#) – were the leading cause of accidental death in the U.S., according to the American Society of Addiction Medicine. There were 20,101 fatal overdoses related to [prescription painkillers](#) and 12,990 stemming from heroin, according to ASAM. On March 1, Maryland Gov. Larry Hogan declared the state’s opioid addiction crisis a state of emergency and committed an additional \$50 million over the ensuing five years for drug prevention, enforcement and [treatment](#).

For the loved ones of an addict, there’s no cost to joining a [support group](#), which can bolster their mental outlook as they deal with an array of fraught emotions. Joining such a group, whether it’s Nar-Anon or Al-Anon or one formed in recent years in response to the opioid epidemic, is generally helpful, experts say. Here’s how they recommend going about it:

1. Let go of shame. Many family members of addicts feel stigmatized and don't talk about their loved one's disease to outsiders or even each other. "It's a disease with shame, and it shouldn't be, because it's just as deadly as cancer," says Sharon Olszewski, 65, who started a support group in suburban Maryland. People who hold on to a sense of stigmatization can cut themselves off from the support of a group, several PABA members say. Olszewski launched a group after someone from Caron Treatment Centers, which has several residential treatment programs in the eastern part of the country, asked her in December 2014 to talk to other loved ones of addicts about her role in her son's recovery. Olszewski's son, Tony, has twice been through treatment at a Caron facility and now works at one as a counselor's aide.

2. Check with state and local authorities and rehab facilities. Officials with your state and local health or social services departments may be aware of support groups, Carise says. Rehabilitation centers in your area can also make referrals. Some local law enforcement agencies can help you find one as well. For example, the Charles County Office of the Sheriff typically hosts every third PABA meeting. You can also go online to search for support groups.

3. Try different groups. "If you don't like a support group the first time, go back and keep trying," Carise says. "If the first one isn't what you want, try a different one. Meetings tend to have personalities of their own, just like people."

4. Become engaged. "People can get the most out of a [support group](#) by participating honestly, as much as possible, and attending regularly," says [Anita Gadhia-Smith](#), a psychotherapist who practices in the District of Columbia and suburban Maryland. "Speaking in the group, connecting with other members both before and after the meeting, and offering to do service within the group are ways to enhance connection and benefit the most. Attending regularly is especially important in order to form relationships with other members of the group, which takes time."

5. Don't give up. "Where there is life, there is hope," says [Cris Prillaman](#), spokeswoman for the New Destiny Treatment Center in Clinton, Ohio. "Don't enable people, but keep reaching out. You don't have to reach out with a check, but with love and concern and compassion. You can't predict when someone who's an addict for years will decide they've had enough."