

You're in Recovery and Your Significant Other Drinks. 3 Tips for Staying Sober

Put your recovery ahead of everything else, experts say.

By [Ruben Castaneda](#) | Staff Writer Oct. 24, 2016, at 9:59 a.m.



If your partner's drinking habits are spiraling out of control, try to help, but don't lose your own control in the process.

When Emily Sadler quit drinking eight years ago, her boyfriend was initially interested in her recovery from [alcoholism](#). Before long, his attention to her recovery program waned, and he continued to [drink heavily](#), Sadler says.

“He was my best friend and my drinking buddy. We would go out and get drunk together and have these dramatic fights,” Sadler says. “We had this fiery relationship. Then I got sober, and I was no longer dramatic. Instead, I went to support-group meetings.”

Sadler outgrew her boyfriend and learned how to take care of her two adolescent boys, from a failed marriage, by herself. “I was on this path of spirituality and recovery, I was changing, and he wasn’t,” Sadler, 42, recalls. “I became less dramatic and volatile, which had been part of our connection. I knew I could never drink safely again, but he kept drinking right in front of me.” For two years, the Scottsdale, Arizona, couple cycled through breakups and reconciliations before they split up for good. Her boyfriend wasn’t going to change, while she was evolving, Sadler says.

The situation Sadler faced is common for people who are new to sobriety. Kicking [alcohol](#) or drugs, or both, is difficult for anyone. For many people, getting sober is complicated by the fact that they have a spouse or significant other who drinks or uses drugs, often abusively, experts of alcoholism and addiction say. “I’ve seen this happen to thousands of people, with many, many couples,” says Nicki Nance, a master addiction counselor and assistant professor in the psychology department at Beacon College in Leesburg, Florida. The dilemma can be even more complicated if the couple have children.

[See: [7 Health Risks of Binge Drinking You Can't Ignore.](#)]

The partner who continues to drink may put his or her loved one's recovery at risk without intending to, says Dr. Shanthi Mogali, director of psychiatry at Mountainside Treatment Center in Canaan, Connecticut. “Many times, a partner who is still drinking and who doesn’t think they have a problem doesn’t understand the impact they have on the person seeking treatment,” Mogali says. For example, for a person in early recovery, watching someone they used to imbibe with drink alcohol could trigger cravings that could lead to a relapse, Mogali says.

When one half of a couple stops drinking or using drugs while the other continues to indulge, it puts their relationship into “disequilibrium,” Nance says. “If one person is in recovery, he or she is getting better, while the other one who is [still drinking](#) or using drugs is getting worse,” Nance says. She noted that alcoholism is a progressive disease that affects tens of millions of people – about 16 million people in the U.S. drank heavily and 27 million people used illicit drugs, mostly [marijuana](#) – according to the 2014 National Survey on Drug Use and Health.



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Couples who have similar drinking patterns report being happier than those with dissimilar imbibing habits, according to a study published in July in *The Journals of Gerontology Series B: Psychological Series*. Couples in which both partners drank or both abstained were happier than couples with different drinking habits, the study said.

A 2013 study by researchers from the University of Buffalo's Research Institute on Addictions found that nearly half of the marriages of 634 couples ended in divorce when only one spouse drank heavily while their partner did not drink or indulged occasionally. The research indicated the dissolution rate for couples who were both heavy drinkers was 35 percent. Couples that did not engage in heavy drinking or did not imbibe at all had a divorce rate of 30 percent.

[See: [14 Ways Alcohol Affects the Aging Process.](#)]

People who are in recovery and have a significant other who is still drinking or using drugs need to be aware of the risks this dynamic can pose to their sobriety, experts say. There are specific steps they can take to protect their sobriety:

Put your recovery first. Make sobriety your priority, and do whatever you must to safeguard it, says Anita Gadhia-Smith, a [psychotherapist](#) who practices in the District of Columbia and Bethesda, Maryland. That means [counseling](#) appointments and support-group meetings take precedence over spending time with a significant other, she says. If you are involved with someone who's negatively affecting your emotional, spiritual,

professional or physical well-being, that's a sign that you are putting your relationship ahead of your recovery, and you need to adjust your priorities.

Develop a sobriety support network. Make friends with people who are in recovery and spend time with them, Nance says. People who join Alcoholics Anonymous are strongly encouraged to find a sponsor, someone who can help guide them through their journey in recovery. Your partner may not become part of your support network, especially if he or she is still drinking or using drugs. "Think of yourself as falling out of a building," Nance says. "You want as many people as possible holding the net. The person you love may not be one of the people holding the net."

If your partner is sinking, try to help, but don't go down with the ship. If your significant other's drinking or drug use is getting out of control, try to help by suggesting he or she join a support group or get treatment, Gadhia-Smith says. If someone is in dire condition and needs immediate help, you can organize an intervention by family members and friends, urging the person to get treatment. Employers can do this, too. Do all you can to help, but if your significant other continues to deteriorate, think seriously about [leaving](#).

[See: [How to Break 7 Unhealthy Habits.](#)]

Sadler says she's never regretted breaking up with her ex, who she is still friends with. She now runs her own business, an employment agency, and in 2014 appeared in "Lipstick & Liquor," a documentary about suburban women who abuse alcohol. Sadler says she could not have progressed if she had stayed with her ex, and the positive changes in her life since she got sober "take my breath away."