

Impact of Substance Use Disorder on the Family System

Supporting family recovery for healthier outcomes

Substance Use Disorder (SUD) is increasingly recognized as a family condition that affects the physical, psycho-social, and economic wellbeing of the entire family system.¹ Over 1.4 million Canadians (4%) 15 years of age and older have reported needing professional help for their substance use³. Notably, individuals with a SUD cannot be effectively treated without considering the impact on the entire family.

Ongoing SUD research has highlighted the need to shift the conceptualization of the family's role from facilitating

treatment for the individual to recognizing that each family member may require their own support and treatment. Evidence suggests that interventions targeting family members, both individually and as a group, are effective in improving psychological well-being, coping, and family functioning.⁵

If you are in Alberta and are seeking support related to a family member's SUD community resources, support programs, and treatment options, **please contact 2-1-1 Alberta.**^a

Family System Theory

Family system theory highlights the idea that the family functions as an interconnected system in which each member both influences and is influenced by the actions and experiences of others. Consequently, SUD places a significant weight on each member of the family, ultimately disrupting the functioning of the entire family system. In response, families often adapt their patterns of interactions and day-to-day living to maintain homeostasis⁴.

Homeostasis is described as a sense of stability and balance, even when these interactions may enable unhealthy dynamics.⁴

Resources:
a. 211 Alberta: <https://ab.211.ca>

- References:
1. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-65873-0_26
 2. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-82583-5>
 3. Health Canada. (2026). *Canadian Substance Use Survey (2025 cycle)*. Government of Canada. <https://health-infobase.canada.ca/substance-use/reports/csus/>
 4. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/23731414/>
 5. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/36744608/>

Impact on the Family System:



STRAINED FAMILY ROLES & DYNAMICS

Intimate partners and others are at risk of boundary difficulties and relationship strain:

When helping becomes part of a family member's role: A spouse may spend years monitoring or controlling access to a substance to protect the family unit. This attempt at caregiving can become central to their identity. When the person enters recovery, the family member may struggle with losing their role or purpose, requiring new boundaries, relationships, and sources of meaning.



EMOTIONAL & PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACT

- Feelings of fear, guilt, shame, helplessness.
- Neglecting one's own mental health and well-being.



IMPACT ON CHILDREN

Children face an increased risk of: Neglect, abuse, mental illness, SUD, developmental delays, academic challenges, and parentification.

When children become the adults: A child may take on responsibilities well beyond their age, which may become central to their identity, sense of safety, and wellbeing. When a parent enters recovery and resumes the parental role trust may need to be rebuilt and the child may need help to relinquish responsibilities they had come to see as their own.



IMPACT ON SOCIAL WELFARE

- Financial instability.
- Involvement with child welfare, legal, and health systems.