

PARTNERS OF DRINKERS
A RESOURCE BOOK

INTRODUCTION

Who are partners of problem drinkers?

The term 'partners of problem drinkers' covers a wide range of people. A partner may be the wife, husband, boy/girlfriend, de facto or a person in a lesbian/gay relationship with someone who drinks heavily. Other people who are affected by someone else's drinking can include parents whose children have drinking problems, children whose parents drink, or the brothers and sisters of a drinker. Many different people can feel the impact of someone else's drinking on their lives.

The Partners of Problem Drinkers project

This booklet was written as part of a research project about partners of problem drinkers.

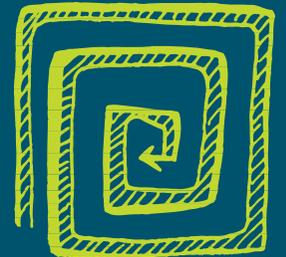
During this project, many partners of drinkers were asked to talk about what it was like to live with someone who had a drinking problem. Some of these people were living with a drinker, others had left their relationship. Partners were also asked to talk about how they coped with the drinking and the problems that it caused. They were asked who they got support from and how happy they were in their relationship.

For many people who participated in the research, this was the first time they had ever spoken to someone, other than friends or family, about the problems that someone else's drinking caused in their lives. Others had tried different types of help: self-help groups, counselling or talking with their local GP.

The experiences which partners talked about in these interviews, and the suggestions they made about how to cope with a drinker, were used to compile this booklet.

'I THINK I'VE BEEN THERE': TEN COMMON PROBLEMS FOR PARTNERS OF DRINKERS

In the interviews that were undertaken for the Partners of Drinkers project, many different problems and concerns were discussed. Partners seemed to find it a relief to know that other people in similar situations had 'been there', just like them. Here are the most common problems and concerns they talked about.



1

The relationship

Some partners recognised that the drinking was a problem because of the effect that it was having on their relationship with the drinker. The drinking was related to an increased feeling of distance between the partner and the drinker. Partners also talked about an increasing feeling of being alone in the relationship and being responsible for another child, not having a relationship with another adult. Partners often felt that this process of recognition occurred over many years. Some partners felt that they might have been able to help the drinker if they had recognised the problem earlier.

Partners also recognised the effect that the drinking was having on their relationship because of what was happening in their sex life.

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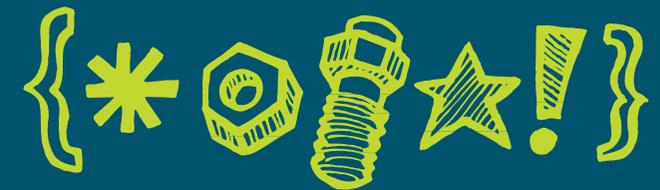
Arguments and abuse

When the drinker was drinking, almost any situation had the potential to become an argument. The subject of arguments often included: money, the past, the behaviour of the partner, the drinking (e.g. finding an excuse to drink) or the children.

Partners were aware that the drinker may then use the argument as an excuse to drink.

Arguments would often involve verbal abuse—being yelled at, called names or put down were the most common forms of verbal abuse partners experienced.

Although it didn't happen as often, physical abuse was also a big problem for some partners.



Initially I had no idea that his drinking would cause us problems. It took me a long, long time to understand that this was very serious.

But it was obvious that we were moving further and further apart. And that I was treating him more like one of the kids than like another adult. Rita

I tried to tell him in a really nice way that when he was drinking I didn't find him sexually attractive. But he would always say that the drinking didn't affect him, so I'd sleep with him anyway. Michelle

Silly things will annoy him, anything in his mind—lumps in the mashed potatoes. He'll get mad and then he starts going on and throwing things and screaming. I try and be calm. Sometimes I take the kids and leave. Delia

I used to get verbal abuse, he would say awful things about me, and try to pick a fight. Jill

He used to beat me and one time I went to hospital and I thought, 'Well, he's put me in hospital, now it's time to get out'. Joanne

3

Children and family life

Partners were aware that the drinker and their behaviour had an impact on their children and their family life. All partners agreed that the drinking would often prevent the drinker from joining in family activities.

Partners were concerned about the effect that the drinker's behaviour was having on the relationship between them and the children.

Partners sometimes felt that younger children were not as aware of the drinker's behaviour, if they were drinking or at their worst after the children went to bed. However, as children grew older, partners were aware that they could no longer hide the drinking from them. They would often worry that despite the efforts they made, the relationship between the children and the drinker had been damaged.

Partners' biggest concerns were often about their children's future and what effect being in a family where there were problems with alcohol would have on them.

I don't think that children fit into a drinker's lifestyle because the children demand too much attention and it takes his attention away from the drinking. Deb

I played the game of trying to make daddy look good in the children's eyes rather than leaving them to see him as he was. Monica

They are aware that he drinks too much and I think they have lost a certain amount of respect for him because of it, and because of how honest I have been about the drinking. I think ultimately they'll be able to cope with it better than if it was just thrown on them out of the blue. Miranda

4

Finances

Partners considered that the drinking caused financial problems.

Many considered that they had no control over when and how money was spent by the drinker.

Partners with full or part-time paid employment found that their money often paid for the basics like food, electricity and clothes.



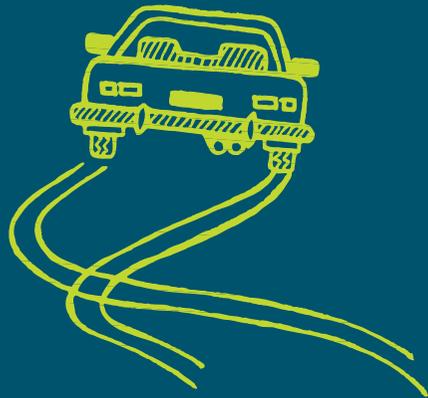
All of his money he keeps for himself and his drinking. I still feel desperate at times because there's so many things you are up against. Sally

On pay night you didn't see him, and when he came home there was none left. I was forever asking my family for something to tide us over. Ingrid

We muddle through somehow. I'm not giving him any money at the moment. My money pays the rent, the food, and telephone bills and stuff like that. Tricia

5 *Drink driving*

Partners had a lot of stories to tell about the drinker's drinking and driving. It was high on the list of situations that they felt needed to be dealt with effectively because of the immediate danger driving with someone who had been drinking placed themselves and their children in.



The police have suspended his licence for drink driving, but he drives anyway. He ignores the fact that he can cause injury or kill himself. It doesn't seem to register anymore.

He genuinely believes in his own head that he is invincible to a degree. He is convinced there is nothing the police can do to hurt him. Ollie

6 *The partner's health and self-esteem*

Partners identified how living with a drinker affected their physical and mental health. Feeling as if they had 'aged', gaining weight, losing weight, 'always being at the doctor's' were some of the ways that they felt the effects of the stressful circumstances they lived in.

There seemed to be a pattern to the way that partners identified the effect of the drinking on their mental and emotional health, which started with realising that they were beginning to believe the things that the drinker said about them.

I'm thinking, 'Is this me? Is this my problem?' Maybe it isn't his problem, maybe I am like this. You start to question yourself... Fiona

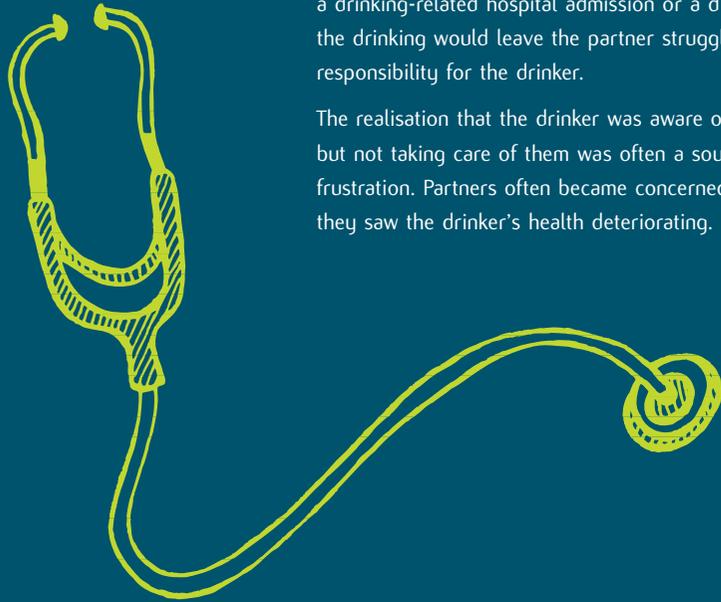
Sometimes I look at myself and think I don't really like myself in certain respects, but I've just evolved like that. I don't like having to get angry a lot but what can you do? You've got to stick up for yourself. Abbie

7

The drinker's health and the future

Partners were usually aware of the effect that the drinking was having on the drinker's health, both physical and mental. They watched the drinker suffer from such things as the shakes, vomiting blood after a binge, cirrhosis, pancreatitis and memory loss. Often, a drinking-related hospital admission or a diagnosis associated with the drinking would leave the partner struggling with a sense of responsibility for the drinker.

The realisation that the drinker was aware of their health problems but not taking care of them was often a source of enormous frustration. Partners often became concerned about the future if they saw the drinker's health deteriorating.



I used to nag him to go to the doctor. I've tried to go and see him (the doctor) myself before my husband went but I started to feel like the mother of a child and I shouldn't have to do that. Miranda

Even after the doctor told him what would happen if he kept drinking, he still drank. He says he enjoys it too much to want to stop and life would be awful without it. I figure there's nothing more I can do. Kaye

I wonder where he is going to end up, I'm angry because I look at him and think, I'm going to end up with a sick husband and I'm going to have to cope with a sickness which has been self-inflicted. Abbie

8

Support

Partners spoke about the isolation that drinking can cause. This isolation was in part not their choice—friends or family might choose not to socialise with them because of the drinker's behaviour. However, the isolation might also result from the partner choosing not to talk with family and friends about the drinking. Partners faced a continuing dilemma concerning who to talk to. They were protecting themselves—and sometimes the drinker—from exposure.



Mum's learnt a lot. She is someone that I can talk to. She is aware of the problem and I don't have to hide it from her. She likes him as a person, so she is not putting him down, she's not putting me down, she is just being accepting and understanding. She's really good actually. Abbie

I don't discuss it with them very much at all. I tried very hard to get them to understand and I have given them information, but I found that they just didn't want to know. Michelle

Social life

Partners found that their social life would narrow down, usually due to the drinker's drinking and their behaviour when they were drunk. Whether they were out with family and friends, or had visitors at home, the situations were often similar.



He will always be fine in company, but when he gets home, he will decide that this (the drinking) is good fun and he'll have another one. That's when it will start, when he gets home. Rosemary

If we have people around he will drink and then he will start arguing until they get pretty offended. I just stay quiet, I stay out of it because sometimes I have joined in but then later I get accused of being on their side, so I just stay right out of it.

Afterwards, I feel upset and really sorry and quite often when he's gone I will ring them up and apologise. Vera

Oh there are times that you think you would leave but you couldn't leave because you wouldn't have any money to leave and nowhere to go. Cynthia

What am I going to do, where am I going to go with three kids? If I leave the house, what's he going to do to it, in his anger or

Leaving the relationship

For two-thirds of the partners who were still living with a drinker, one of their greatest concerns was whether they should leave the relationship. If they chose to stay, some of the reasons for doing so were: finances, stability for children, fear of loneliness, commitment to the drinker, and not wanting to be the one to 'give up' a home that they valued. In positive and negative terms, the positives of staying in the relationship still outweighed the negatives.

Often a crisis precipitated leaving—a particularly violent incident involving the partner and/or the children, an argument, or a sudden deterioration in the relationship.

Partners who had left, often for long periods of time, spoke about the fear of returning to the relationship, or choosing a relationship with another drinker.

frustration? I don't know. I'm not going to leave my house. Abbie

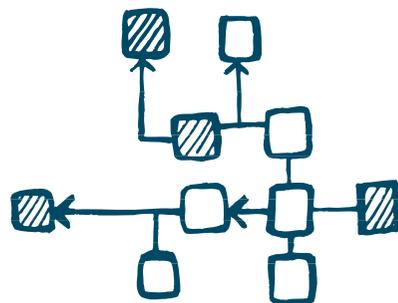
I pushed it aside and hoped it would go away, I was really miserable but I accepted it. Then I thought, 'Why should I accept this misery? Here I am 39, I've got to enjoy what's left of my life'. Kaye

You have to take a step to be able to take the second step. If you don't do something with your life from day one when you first decide to go—if you just sit there and vegetate, that's what will happen—you will vegetate and he will come back and take over your life again. Ollie

'I THINK I'VE TRIED THAT': EIGHT WAYS OF COPING WITH PROBLEMS

The Partners of Drinkers project also looked at how partners coped with the drinker and the drinking. Again, knowing about what other people had done in similar situations was important information to have. Here are the most common ways of coping that partners have tried.

Partners rarely found it useful to try to cope with big problems like stopping the drinking. Instead, concentrating on what might help them, and doing this in small steps often seemed to achieve more for a partner than focusing on the drinker and the drinking. Sometimes it also challenged the drinker to review and change their own behaviour.



1

Negotiating and effective communication

There are some benefits to be gained from negotiating rules or acceptable ways of behaving with the drinker when they are sober. Negotiating at this time maximises your chances of achieving cooperation and agreement. Sticking with what has been agreed to when the drinker is drinking can be an effective way of dealing with a problem. However, as with any coping strategy, you need to be aware of your own safety and that of other family members. Finding a time when your drinking partner is sober and using this time to talk about the issues that are worrying you can be one step towards more effective communication. Some of the issues that other partners negotiated about included:

- > who takes responsibility for the drinker's health
- > how much alcohol can be kept or consumed at home
- > drinking and driving
- > sharing the bed, sex and drinking
- > what action you will take if the drinking gets out of hand when you are out together
- > finances
- > care and responsibility for children

Effective communication may also mean:

- > learning how to express feelings about the drinking and not the drinker
- > letting the drinker know that you care about them and are concerned about the drinking
- > reminding them of the effect that the drinking may be having on their health
- > focusing on the issue to be discussed and not getting drawn into an argument about the drinking
- > being able to talk with the children about the drinking and not the drinker



It was very hard to explain and get through to the kids in terms they could understand, that it is OK to love Dad but you don't have to love what he is doing.

If you get kids to talk about what's on their mind and what is bothering them it diminishes it in their mind, and you can get on with things. Ingrid

2

Getting out: mentally, verbally & physically

You may find that getting out when the drinker has been drinking can be a very practical way of avoiding further problems—arguments that go on for hours, verbal abuse, name calling and put-downs, physical abuse.

When your safety or the safety of children is involved, then getting out may be one of the best options to consider.

Partners themselves were usually the best judge of how far they needed to remove themselves to avoid verbal or physical abuse from occurring.

Getting out could be done mentally by:

- > ignoring what the drinker is saying when they are drunk

Getting out could be done verbally by:

- > refusing to argue with the drinker when they are drunk

Getting out could be done physically by:

- > moving yourself and the kids to another room or, if necessary, out of the house
- > going for a walk
- > going to a friend's or neighbour's house

All of a sudden it clicked that I wasn't really arguing with him I was arguing with the bottle. It took me years to work that out. I could sit and argue for hours on end and we'd get nowhere and all I'd do was get upset and the next morning he wouldn't know a thing. I'd be left with the angry feelings. So now I just agree and walk away. Miranda

I don't argue with him. As soon as he starts to rant and rave, I get myself and the kids in the car and we sleep the night at mum's. Maddie

Getting help and support

You will find that help and support comes in many different shapes and forms. Friends and family emerged as a great source of support for partners, although you may need to consider carefully who to talk with, how much to say and how often to use friends and family as a source of support. Not all family and friends will be willing or able to be supportive.

Friends can be used as a source of support, or you may prefer to have fun with friends and use counsellors or groups like AlAnon for support.

Clubs and groups may provide you with help and support. Several partners mentioned their religious faith and the church group that they belonged to as helpful.

If violence is occurring in your relationship, you may find it necessary to seek particular types of help such as police involvement or domestic violence counselling.

Financial and legal advisors can be used when issues such as home ownership need to be clarified.

Neighbourhood houses, community health services, drug and alcohol services, psychologists and psychiatrists can be used as sources of support and help. Call the Alcohol & Drug Information Service for details of services available in your area (see [Getting information and resources](#)).

I have built a very big supportive network myself. It has been my life line. That's what has kept me sane and together and able to move on in life rather than just being stuck down in this emotional mess. Monica

I would try not to unload on my friends too much. I like to keep that part separate, my friends are my friends and maybe I'd have a bit of a gripe but that would be it. If it gets too much I see a counsellor. I don't think I would have been able to cope otherwise, I think I would've gone under without that help. Laurie

Feeling good

When partners became aware of the emotional impact of the drinking on their self-esteem, this awareness often acted as a cue for trying to find help. You may need to look for things that you can do which will help you to begin to feel better about yourself, regardless of whether the drinker is drinking or not. Some of the things that other partners tried are:

- > involvement with friends
- > involvement with their children's school and with children's activities
- > sport and keeping fit
- > a job
- > finding time to read a book

These activities are some of the ways that you can begin the process of building up your confidence.

I actually got involved in my daughter's callisthenics club and I am loving it. I'm not going to be down there any more and every time he abuses me I can turn around and say, 'Hey I'm OK, I know I'm OK'. Miranda

Getting information and resources

Wanting to find out more about drinking problems, finding help and support or finding out about ways to feel good, mean that you need to get more information. This is available. The easiest way to access this information is through the Alcohol & Drug Information Service (ADIS). Telephone counsellors at this service have access to the kinds of information you may need about counselling or self-help support services for yourself and your children, women's information services and health services. Your local neighbourhood house or community health centre will also have more detailed, local information about groups and activities. ADIS will also have all the information you need about drinking problems. You just need to call and ask.

Alcohol & Drug Information Service: 1300 13 1340

For years I believed that I could do it on my own, that I didn't need help. Then one day I decided I would make a phone call—why did I wait so long? It was such a simple thing to do. Maddie

Feeling in control: making plans

Making plans can help you feel in control of many different situations. Partners made plans about all kinds of things such as:

- > Emergency and safety plans for themselves and their children to make sure that they weren't physically abused.
- > Children always having enough money in their pocket to make a phone call to a family friend, if they are out with the drinker.
- > Plans to ensure the quality of their family life—family activities, school commitments, or holidays—were planned so that they could take place with or without the drinker's cooperation.
- > Plans concerning finances—trying to ensure that they maintained some control over what money was available to them. Such plans might include having a bank account in their own name, or assuming responsibility for the financial running of the household.
- > Plans concerning leaving the relationship—many partners talked about the importance of building up a network of family and friends who would support them if and when they left their drinking partner.

We agreed he'd only have a certain amount each week and I would take care of the rest. So I became known as the accountant because I always had to figure out ways to manage. Kaye

There was no big flash about leaving, but nothing in his life was going right and my life was starting to build up, and it was a weighing-up process—When you are not here, things are great'. And that was the overriding factor I think. I want the peace, I want the quiet. Ingrid

7

Giving up responsibility: getting realistic

Sometimes, living with a drinking partner was described as having another child in the house. Partners found that the best way of coping with this was to stop feeling or being responsible for the drinker. This might mean things like:

- > refusing to feel responsible for the drinking or for stopping/controlling it
- > refusing to be responsible for taking care of the drinker's health
- > leaving social situations if the drinker was drinking too much

I say 'If you want to come, come.' No pressure, no nothing. Because if he comes along and has a bad time or doesn't get enough to drink or whatever then it's my fault. Now the responsibility is on him.

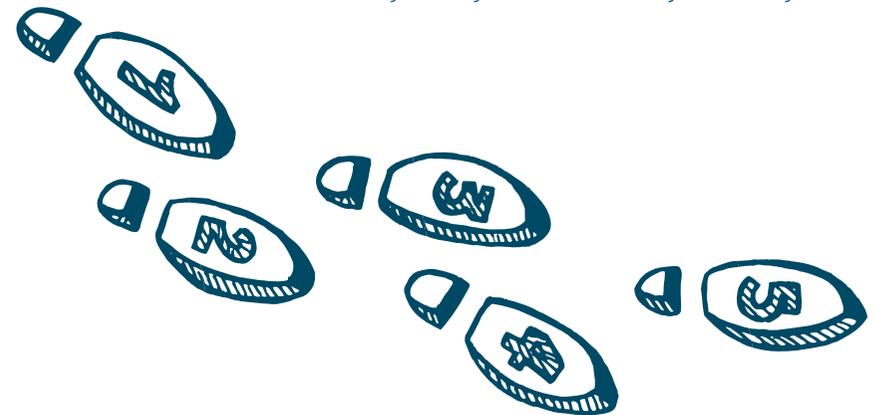
I hate going out without him, and we hardly ever go out together, but this is the best way to deal with it. Cynthia

8

Problem-solving

One of the best ways of working out how to cope with a difficult situation is to use some problem-solving steps. Using these steps will help you to decide what might work and what may not work in your particular situation. These steps are outlined here for you.

You may have already identified one or two problems that you want to work on. Using the problem-solving steps may seem awkward and cumbersome at first but once you are used to going through them you will find that they can be very effective.



STEP ONE

Identify the problem. If it seems too big and overwhelming try breaking it down into smaller steps.

STEP TWO

Think of any ideas for handling it—don't be too fussy. Write down even those ideas that may seem silly.

STEP THREE

Choose which way of handling it seems best for you.

STEP FOUR

Try your idea out.

STEP FIVE

If it works, reward yourself. If it doesn't work, try one of your other ideas.

A friend, a counsellor, or someone who knows you and your situation may be a good source of help with the problem-solving process.



A FINAL WORD

The partners of drinkers who participated in the project interviews found that there were no easy answers to their problems. Reading through this booklet may have confirmed for you that you have 'been there, done that'; it may have given you some new ideas about ways of coping, or a different way of tackling problems.

Remember that resources and information are important and available—contact the Alcohol & Drug Information Service on 1300 13 1340.

Produced by

- National Centre for Education & Training on Addiction
- Drug & Alcohol Services South Australia

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Research was assisted with funding from the National Drug Strategy,
Commonwealth Department of Health & Aged Care