



“Above and beyond”

**The key role families
play in recovery**

July 2024



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Foreword

"Over three quarters said that their families played a key role in their recovery"



We know from our experience that family support helps family members to deal with the negative effects of their loved one's drinking or drug use, improve their mental health and wellbeing, and enhance their productivity and engagement in society.

Based on the findings from our latest study, we now have evidence to show that family support also benefits the person struggling with their drinking or drug use, as it helps family members to help their loved ones to achieve and maintain recovery.

In this study we ran a survey completed by over 100 people who had previously experienced problems with their drinking and/or drug use and over three quarters said that their families played a key role in their recovery, helping in multiple ways, going above and beyond.

Whilst not all of those family members were able to access support for themselves, those that did highlighted it as crucial in giving family members the tools and understanding to navigate the complexities of supporting someone through addiction.

Vivienne Evans OBE
Chief Executive, Adfam

Executive Summary



Three quarters of the people that responded to Adfam's online survey who had experienced problems with their drinking/drug use credit family members with playing a significant role in their recovery.



Mothers and female partners are most often cited as the ones providing support.



The survey shows families helping in many different ways, offering emotional support, providing housing, caring for children and supporting people financially.



Half of the people responding in our survey to questions about financial support said they had received over £5000 from their families. This was used to cover things like bills, debts and treatment costs.



Our survey reveals that most family members are not getting any expert help or advice. Only 25% of people surveyed say that their family have received specialist support.



Nearly two thirds of people taking part in our survey believe that their family would benefit from an online support service.



The support provided by family members in helping their loved ones to achieve and maintain recovery is a huge help to drug and alcohol services and the NHS, and potentially represents a considerable saving to the public purse.

Recommendations

01 | Funding

Funding needs to be allocated to specialist drug and alcohol family support services. People who have experienced drug and alcohol problems recognise just how important the support of their family is in achieving and maintaining their recovery. However very little national or local funding is earmarked to provide services to support those families. Short of mandating the provision of services or ring fencing local budgets, there are mechanisms that can be used to encourage areas to invest more. This can include strengthening guidelines, providing additional advice and support, setting expectations around the percentage of the total budget that allocated to specialist family support and recording and publishing the number of families being helped.

02 | Skills Audit

Areas should conduct a skills audit to understand the strengths and training needs of staff working with families. Upskilling the existing workforce may be a cost effective way to improve the local offer.

03 | Recording data

Irrespective of national reporting requirements, local areas should aim to quantify the number of families affected by a family member's drinking or drug use and record the number of families who are actually supported by specialist drug and alcohol family services.

Understanding the gap between the needs of local families and the availability and reach of the services designed to help them is a prerequisite to establishing a more equitable allocation of resources.

04 | Combating Drugs Partnerships

Effective family representation at Combating Drugs Partnership meetings is one way of raising the profile of families and ensuring that their voices are heard and their needs are considered alongside those of people using drugs and alcohol themselves.

Survey findings

Adfam launched a survey inviting adults who have experienced problems with their drinking and/or drug use to comment on the part their family played in their recovery.

We are delighted that 117 people from across the UK responded. We cannot say if the people who took part are typical of those in recovery (the majority of respondents were White British (84%), most were aged between 35 and 64 (90%) and just over half (51%) were men.) but it is noteworthy just how many of the responses we received chime with the experiences of the very many families we speak to every year and mirror the experiences of Adfam and other organisations in the sector.

One striking finding from our survey is that just over three quarters (76%) of participants said that family member/s played a "significant role" in their recovery.

To put this into context, Government figures for the year ending 31st March 2023 record nearly 300,000 people in contact with publicly funded drug and alcohol services. The charity Alcohol Change UK estimates that there are over 600,000 dependent drinkers in the country, and the Office for National Statistics estimates that the UK has about 770,000 frequent drug users.

If anything approaching three quarters of these people receive significant support from their families to help them overcome problems caused by drug or alcohol use, then that is a huge help to our drug and alcohol services and represents a massive saving to the NHS.

It is clear from Adfam's work across England and from the results of this survey, that when it comes to supporting people in their recovery, families matter.

They never gave up loving me

Not giving up faith in me was the most powerful thing and supporting me now through the transition to 'normal life'

They have no idea just how much I appreciated their support and kindness

I don't think I would of been able to get through the residential time if I hadn't had the support I had at the time

Just being there to listen and understand what I was feeling and directing me to the support I needed.

My family have been a pivotal support in aiding me to still see my children

My family's unconditional love and not giving up on me [were] the key drivers of [my] recovery

Them gaining more knowledge and understanding about addiction helped me. To speak about each others feelings and being open and accepting that my actions had affected them, how we moved on.

Our survey shows that a wide range of family members are credited with providing support, from grandparents, aunts and uncles, through to children, siblings and cousins.

My daughter became a nurse after dealing with me when I was in active addiction

I wouldn't have recovered with out my Dad's help, even though the relationship was totally broken at times [he] was always there in the background

However the person our participants' cite most frequently, (in over 50% of responses) is their mother.

My mum went above and beyond

Once she realised we were determined to recover she supported us through very difficult times

My mum often cared for my son when I was unable to

My mum was dragged along by my addiction, she showed unconditional love towards me

It is no surprise to Adfam that the burden of caring for individuals struggling with drugs/alcohol falls on mothers. Adfam itself was founded by a mother supporting her child with drug use, as are many local organisations across England supporting families affected by substance use.

The second most commonly cited family member, (mentioned by over 25% of participants) is a female partner or ex partner.

Without her I would be dead, simple as that!

She gave me a reason to be better

Again Adfam often finds that it is female partners who are providing support to the whole family, caring for children, looking after elderly parents, and supporting a partner who is struggling with an addiction.

In Adfam's experience these caring responsibilities put a huge strain on relationships and impact the carers own health and well-being.

The support that is available for families affected by substance use across the UK is relatively inconsistent and something of a 'postcode lottery'. This combined with the stigma surrounding substance misuse makes it's very difficult for family members to get the sort of support they need.

In our survey only 25% of people said that their family member/s received any specialist help or support. This is despite nearly 80% of people wanting such support to be available and 86% believing that it would have helped their family to provide better support to them in their recovery.

Just being able to pick up the phone and speak to family without them judging me because of how much they learnt was a massive help

I feel that they needed reassurance in supporting my recovery journey and an understanding [of] the process of recovery

73% recognised that their family members struggled because they didn't get the support they needed.

There was never the support to kind of help them understand I didn't do what I did for the 'fun of it'

Services for family members were almost non-existent

This lack of care for the carers is something that Adfam hears time and again from families. Often the support is very much focussed on the person with the drug or alcohol problem and not on the people around them who do so much to promote recovery and provide significant help and support before, during and after treatment.

No support was offered to family dealing with me as a substance user

It was a strain for him and it was stressful - he hadn't dealt with addiction of a loved one before

Respondents to our survey cited a range of support offered to them by family members. This included emotional support (85%), help looking after children (40%), practical support (40%), (with things like attending appointments and help filling in forms) and help with finding and maintaining housing (40%), whilst 44% of respondents are currently living with a family member who has supported them in their recovery.

I wouldn't have engaged without the support of lifts to appointments, I would have been further punished for missing them. This includes healthcare, dental care, probation, jobcentre appointments etc.

I moved back in with my parents the last time I came out of hospital and they helped to get me healthy again and drove me to hospital appointments.

I was a single parent once I stopped using so looking after my daughter while I attended courses, college and job interviews.

Travelling 4hrs each way bringing my son for visits weekly. Emotional support when I was missing them. Always being there for me. Reminding me the reasons I am.

Adfam often hears from family members about the financial burden that is heaped on them when they are supporting someone who has a drug or alcohol problem.

In our survey of people recovering from drug or alcohol problems, 56% said they received direct financial support from their families.

When asked to estimate how much this amounted to, a number of people said they were unsure or preferred not to answer. Of those who did give an estimate, about 15% said they had received up to £500. Over 50% estimated they had received more than £5000. Some people had received tens of thousands of pounds from their family.

Adfam has heard from many family members who have said that they have spent all their savings, incurred debts and suffered long term financial hardship supporting someone through their addiction and recovery. Some of the comments received from people in recovery show the lengths to which families will go to in order to try and help.

My partner paid for all of the bills and any expenses for me being alive

[I got] several loans, several bail outs of rent and £100/week living expenses top up for 5 years


They bought me a house, this was £65,000 so add in the funding of my drug habit and the rest [and] the final amount must be substantial!

My mum and son have both helped me financially... there were times when my money had been spent on my addiction and I had no money to pay my utility bills or even [buy] food

Adfam has previously reported on the impact of the cost of living crisis on families living with someone with a drug or alcohol problem. It is not that the families we work with can afford to pay hundreds, thousands or tens of thousands of pounds on supporting a family member through their difficulties, it is that they feel that they have no choice.

Given the burden placed on families, the lack of support available and the huge constraints on carers' time, Adfam wanted to understand what sort of help might best meet the needs of family members. 63% of participants felt that their family would benefit from an online support service accessible at a time that suited them.

It is important to remember that families are in this for the long haul. Recovery is not a point in time, it is a journey and families need support throughout that journey.



6 years into my sober recovery. We are all still recovering!

The results from this survey give a compelling picture of both the life changing and life saving support provided by families, but also the sparsity of support that is available to help families.

We believe it points to the need to fundamentally rethink the allocation of resources so that the people most intimately involved in promoting and supporting recovery are themselves supported.

Adfam conducted an online survey between December 2023 and March 2024. The survey was advertised through Adfam's network of providers and supporters. The survey was aimed at adults in the UK who described themselves as recovered or in recovery from drugs and / or alcohol. 146 people responded, of whom 117 fitted this description. All responses were provided anonymously.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank everyone who took part in this survey and shared their stories so openly and honestly, and provided such a compelling insight into their lived experience.

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Finally, thank you to Philip Breslin and Anna Lee for their valuable support with this research.

About Adfam

Adfam is a leading national charity tackling the negative effects of drugs and alcohol on family members and friends. We do this by:

- **Empowering** families and friends to get the support they need.
- **Building** the confidence, capacity and capability of frontline workers to provide effective services.
- **Influencing** decision-makers to understand the needs of hundreds of thousands of people coping with the effects of a family member's drinking or drug use.

Since 1984, Adfam have been supporting and working with family members, practitioners and strategic partners to bring about lasting positive change.

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