

Partners' Guide to Addiction

Support for partners affected by gambling, gaming and other compulsive behaviours

Behavioural addiction can place enormous pressure on a relationship. Gambling, gaming, shopping, pornography and other compulsive patterns may bring secrecy, debt, broken agreements, emotional distance and repeated cycles of hope and disappointment. This guide focuses on the partner's needs as well as the person experiencing the addiction.

Name the impact clearly

You do not need to settle an argument about whether the behaviour 'counts' as addiction before naming its effect. Lost money, disrupted sleep, neglect, secrecy, sexual or emotional disconnection and repeated broken agreements are real relationship issues.

Understand the function

The behaviour may offer escape, stimulation, confidence, relief, achievement or emotional numbing. Understanding this can guide treatment, but it does not mean accepting harm or dishonesty.

Protect shared finances

Where gambling or compulsive spending is involved, consider separate accounts, transaction alerts, gambling blocks, removal of credit access and specialist debt advice. Financial transparency may form part of rebuilding trust.

Digital boundaries

For gaming, pornography, social media or other online behaviours, agreed device-free times, protected sleep, filters or blocking tools may help. Boundaries should support recovery rather than turn you into a full-time monitor.

Rebuilding trust

Trust returns through repeated reliable behaviour. Agree what transparency looks like, how lapses will be disclosed and what happens if agreements are broken. Relationship counselling can help when safe and appropriate.

Do not disappear inside their recovery

Keep your friendships, interests, health appointments and independent support. Your life does not have to remain on hold while you wait to see whether someone else changes.

A practical support plan

You cannot do recovery for somebody else, but you can decide how you will respond.

What I am most worried about	
What is within my control	
What is not within my control	
My financial / home boundaries	
Who I can speak to	
What I will do in a crisis	
One thing I need for myself	

Books that may help

Beyond Addiction

Jeffrey Foote et al.

Family communication and behaviour-change principles that can apply across addictions.

Changing for Good

James Prochaska, John Norcross & Carlo DiClemente

Explains why readiness to change develops in stages.

In the Realm of Hungry Ghosts

Gabor Maté

A compassionate exploration of addiction and human suffering; best read as one perspective rather than a complete clinical account.

Help and information

Adfam	Supports families affected by drinking, drugs and gambling.
SMART Family & Friends	Support for people affected by addictive behaviours.
NHS gambling services	Specialist gambling treatment can include support for affected others in England.
GP / counselling	Useful when the impact is affecting sleep, anxiety, mood or relationship wellbeing.
Emergency support	Seek urgent help for violence, suicidal crisis or immediate danger.

If there is immediate danger, serious violence, collapse, suspected overdose, seizure, severe breathing difficulty or an acute mental-health crisis, seek urgent help. In the UK, call 999 when life is at risk.

Support Hub educational resource — not a replacement for individual medical, safeguarding, legal or emergency advice.