



Challenges Helping Families with Substance Use Issues

The “old school” solution for families faced with a loved one who keeps using substances in spite of consequences was “tough love”.

Tough love – The practice of taking a stern attitude towards a relative or friend suffering from addiction, etc., to help the addict overcome the problem <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/tough+love?s=t>

Tough love is derived from the concept that someone has to “hit bottom” before they can truly change. In today’s world however, tough love is a lot more challenging and involves a lot more risk. In substance abuse treatment, the prototypical example of tough love historically would involve a family completely cutting off their loved one who refused to engage in a recovery program and make appropriate progress. There may come a point when a family, spouse, and other friends and loved ones can no longer stand by and watch someone destroy their lives with substances so they elect to cut off all association and support for that person until they actively get the help they need, which is at the heart of the traditional tough love concept. There are many individuals out there who will attribute their success in recovery to the fact that their family got tough with them and finally said “enough is enough” and cut them off, forcing them to seek help. Therefore, in many instances tough love can be effective. Nevertheless, in today’s world, with today’s substance abuser, utilizing tough love is not nearly as easy as it may seem on the surface. The ultimatum involved with trying to use intense external motivation to get someone to change for their own good is often much more complex than in years past. Placing the challenge of “stop using, and get help or else...” can nowadays often produce an undesired effect or even backfire due to the prevalence of new challenges and risks in today’s world. Therefore, when considering these risks, a counselor working with families is taking a risk by suggesting tough love.



There are several factors that can complicate using tough love as a means to help a drug and alcohol abusing loved one to get help. First, the presence of coexisting mental health risks can complicate the seemingly simple solution of tough love. For example, consider the issue of depression and suicide risk. If a family were to apply tough love with an individual with a significant history of depression and suicide risk there the chance that this person may complete suicide if cut off from the family and left out on their own. A family that made the decision to use tough love ending in such a tragic manner such as suicide would spend the rest of their lives questioning that tough love based decision. The reality of tough love backfiring has to be considered before it is used. This is not to say that a family should be held hostage by the threat of suicide, however when someone has coexisting issues that increase safety risks, those issues cannot be ignored.



Another potential issue that can complicate the tough love approach is the problem of unavailable or unaffordable treatment. Often on televised interventions when a person abusing substances is given an ultimatum to seek help or else be cut off by the family, there is a van outside waiting to take the person away to some long term treatment program. That van and available residential program is often set up and perhaps even paid for by the television program. In reality, for most people, there is no van outside waiting to drive the person who needs help off to a quality residential treatment center. The reality for many is that quality treatment is unaffordable or unavailable, which is a huge challenge for a family who is attempting to say “go get help or else...” Often, there is nowhere affordable or available for a person to go to get the right help, making tough love a very tough option.

Further, economic and housing concerns can be an obstacle to tough love. For example, if a family asked an adult child to move out because of ongoing drinking and drugging, the ideal situation would be for that person to make an attempt to live on their own while continuing their destructive lifestyle only to see it last just a few months before coming back home with their figurative tail between their legs, admitting to the family that they need help and are willing to stop partying if they can just come back. That scenario is a good learning experience. In today’s world however, due to economic struggles and expensive housing, asking a young person to leave home often means rendering that person homeless. In practice it is not easy for a family to decide to live with the fact that their loved one will be homeless if they practice tough love. In some instances it is not so difficult, especially with older substance abusers. However, it is a lot more difficult for a family of an 18 or 19 year old kid to throw their child out on the street, particularly when it is cold outside. In many cases for families it simply is not so easy to just say “stop using and get help or else you’re out...”

A fourth complication to tough love occurs when the legal system gets involved. Court mandated treatment can be lifesaving and there are thousands if not millions of people who can personally attest to how the legal system ordering them to get help was exactly what they needed in order change their lives and get on the right path. In many cases the legal system has made strides with regard to understanding substance use issues however there is an extremely long way to go. Unfortunately still, quite often an individual who needs help and support ends up in jail due to a variety of factors beyond that individual’s control. One form of tough love for many families has been to use the legal system to get help for their substance abusing loved one by calling the police when that person is overtly intoxicated or in possession of illicit substances. This strategy can backfire when the involvement of the legal system, although well-meaning, does not bring about the desired treatment mandates due to a lack of resources or understanding. Quite often, jailing someone for substance use can do more harm than good. This can make it much more difficult for a family attempting to implement tough love to say “stop using now or else I am calling the authorities”

Finally, the prevalence of more dangerous drugs have changed the landscape of the substance abuse treatment world. The increasing availability of both prescription opiates and benzodiazepines as well as increasingly pure illicit drugs such as heroin, cocaine and methamphetamine have raised the stakes and risks involved with the substance abusing population. Similar to the risks involved with coexisting mental health issues and situations like suicidality, risk of overdose or severe withdrawal associated with these harder drugs can make it much more difficult to use tough love. Remember the goal of tough love is to motivate change but no one wants to do that at the risk of completely losing their loved one forever.

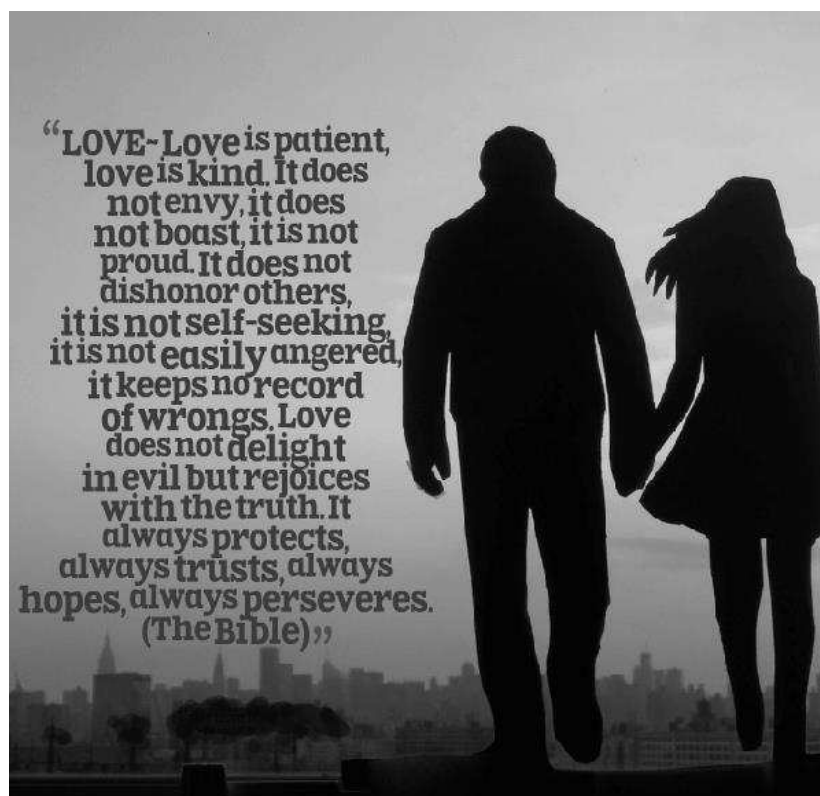


So in many cases, the tough love option may be too tough especially when real risk and safety issue are involved. To read a brief summary on this topic of tough love and substance abuse, click the following link:



[Can Tough Love Be Too Tough?](#)

What Should a Counselors Do?



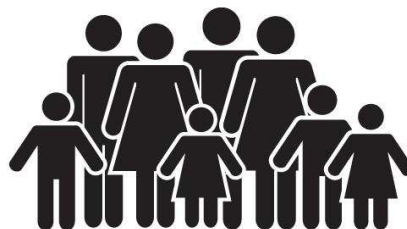
Just as there are rarely easy answers for counselors when helping our clients, there are also rarely if ever easy answers when working with families. The previous information about tough love was just food for thought on the topic, as years ago in the substance abuse field tough love was the primary strategy provided for families from many counseling sources. The precautions and other considerations reviewed up to this point with regard to tough love do not imply that tough love should never be used. There may be a time and a place for a family to apply tough love, however tough love should not be the primary way for families to deal with a resistant substance abusing loved one. Rather, tough love should be closer to the last resort or the “nuclear option” that is only implemented when all hope is lost for a better solution. As a counselor, it is important to use great caution when even suggesting the tough love approach, while always leaving it to the family to make the final decision. As a counselor, one would never want to put themselves in a position where tough love was insisted upon but ended up with tragic results. Ultimately, it should always be the family’s choice and the family should be made aware of the risks involved. Again, this topic of tough love is being considered in such detail because there was a day in the substance abuse treatment field when counselors advised tough love as the only answer. Rather, tough love is simply an option to be considered carefully after exploring other routes, similar to the way someone with a chronic medical condition may try different therapies, natural remedies, outpatient treatments and/or medications



before considering major surgery. The choice to use tough love is parallel to this process as a counselor should be prepared to offer other options first.



From an engagement perspective then, it should be clear to see how helpful it is to work toward engaging families as well as our clients. Including family in the treatment process should not be written off simply because a client refuses to sign a consent for communication with family at the intake. Throughout the treatment process, as we gain rapport with our clients, it is important not to give up on the idea of the client agreeing to include family in his or her treatment. When family is effectively included and engaged in the change process with our clients, then these alternate options for families can be addressed rather than relying solely on tough love. When family is involved, the counselor can work with everyone on communication, assertiveness, identifying boundaries and setting limits, support, family roles, trust, responsibility, family self-care, sharing feelings, and many other alternative areas that can serve as building blocks toward strengthening the family cohesion and resiliency, before resorting to the family dividing itself through tough love. Getting the family involved early in the change process can do a lot to prevent having to use tough love options down the line. Just like with substance abuse and mental health for our clients, there are often no easy answers for families either. Simple solutions can be hard to come by. Still, as counselors, by engaging families just as we engage our clients we can stem the tide toward improved outcomes with those we are trying to help. The counseling tools we use with our clients can also be assimilated for use with families as well and as counselors we can practice our tools of engagement to help families increase motivation and insight to participate in our clients' individualized change process.



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