

# Parents like us.

AN UNOFFICIAL GUIDE TO  
CARING FOR A YOUNG PERSON  
WHO USES SUBSTANCES

written by parents  
for parents



Adapted by parents in Thunder Bay, Ontario.

HONESTY, OPEN-MINDEDNESS,  
AND WILLINGNESS

Not simple

hit rock bottom

compassion

Empathy

Complex

Trauma-clutches-disappears

HOW CAN I HELP

Time out being  
with self

Asked if "I" needed help

Don't judge, till  
you walked in my shoes

Caregiver Working Group Collective Poem facilitated  
by Stacey Hare Hodgins of Making Meaning





## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We acknowledge, with respect and gratitude, that this handbook was developed on the sacred land, originally known as Anemki Wequedong, now the Treaty Territory of the Fort William First Nation, signatories to the Robinson-Superior Treaty of 1850.

*"One day you will tell your story of how you overcame what you went through and it will be someone else's survival guide."*

– Brené Brown

May 2025



We acknowledge the substantial work of parents in Victoria, B.C. in creating the original version of the Parents Like Us handbook, in collaboration with Foundry Victoria, Victoria Youth Clinic, Foundry Central Office, and the Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction. Their work was part of the Improving Treatment Together Project, which was funded by Health Canada. The original handbook illustrations and format were designed by Drawing Change.

The original handbook can be found at:

[www.ccsa.ca/sites/default/files/2025-03/Parents-Like-Us.pdf](http://www.ccsa.ca/sites/default/files/2025-03/Parents-Like-Us.pdf)

This adapted handbook is shaped by the voices and creativity of both caregivers and youth with lived experience in Thunder Bay. Their insights, artwork, and advice offer a powerful reflection of resilience and shared learning for others navigating similar experiences. We are deeply grateful for their willingness to share their stories and perspectives, which form the heart of this resource.

We would also like to acknowledge the many organizations that contributed to the development of this handbook. The project was led by the Thunder Bay District Health Unit, with the support of the Thunder Bay Drug Awareness Committee. With appreciation to Sister Margaret Smith Centre, Thunder Bay Regional Health Sciences Centre, Children's Centre Thunder Bay, and Thunder Bay Catholic District School Board for reviewing this resource.



## ABOUT THE ARTWORK

We are grateful to have worked with various artists who bring not only their creativity, but also their personal connection to substance use, either as a person with lived experience or as someone who has supported others.

Caregivers worked with Stacey Hare Hodgins, founder of Making Meaning, to create a collective poem that highlights advice they would give to someone supporting a loved one who struggles with substance use. Stacey also provided writing prompts and held space for the caregivers to develop and share their personal experiences.

Caregivers expressed their emotions through a watercolour paint activity led by Two-Spirit artist and elder Ma-Nee Chacaby, with support from Céline Mundinger of CreAction Collective. Ma-nee shared their personal experience of recovery and created a space for learning, reflection, and connection through art.

Youth in a live-in treatment program worked with Caroline Kajorinne and Ardelle Sagutcheway of Mindful Makers Collective. Through acrylic paint and poetry, youth shared their feelings, struggles, and advice on how they would want to be supported by the caring adults in their life.

Youth with lived experience and allies participated in a community art activity facilitated by Céline Mundinger of CreAction Collective. Through guided prompts, collage work and painting, participants reflected on what supported them in navigating the system, who supported them and why those efforts made a difference.



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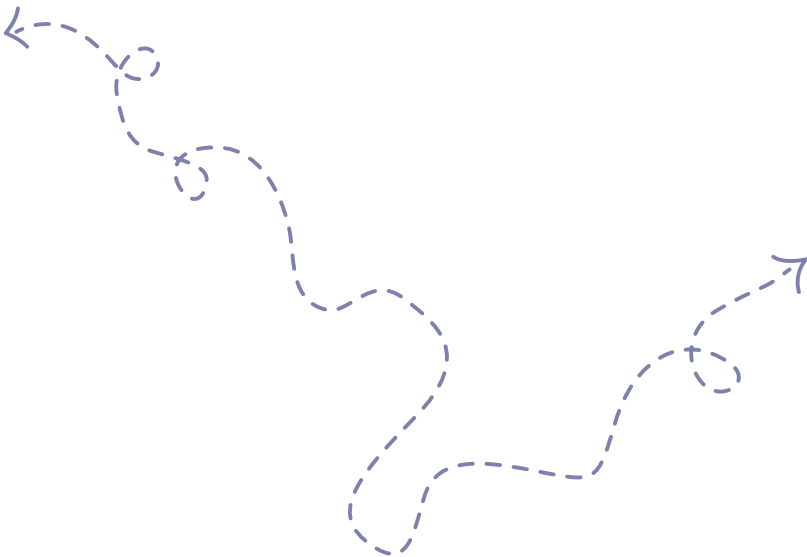
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**What people think supporting someone struggling  
with substance use looks like:**



**What it actually looks like:**





# Introduction

## WHO WE ARE

We are a group of local caregivers in Thunder Bay working with the Thunder Bay District Health Unit to create a handbook for parents and caregivers. We have built on the work from parents in Victoria, B.C. and Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario to produce a handbook that meets local needs in Thunder Bay and the surrounding area. Whether your young person is experimenting with substances, or has developed a substance use disorder, this handbook is meant to help you feel connected to other parents and caregivers going through similar experiences.

## OUR MESSAGE TO YOU

**"You are not alone."**

This handbook is a starting point in the search for connection, understanding, support and resources. You do not have to read this handbook from front to back. Each section contains information and stories that we hope will help you with different parts of your journey. We have all navigated the system in different ways and have accessed different resources. We have learned that there is no straight line to recovery for our young people or our families.

**"We have written this handbook to let you know that you are not alone."**



“

This resource is a testament to the resilience of parents and caregivers who continue to show up, even in the most challenging circumstances. It offers tools, guidance, and hope to help navigate this journey. It affirms that by setting boundaries, you are creating an environment of care, safety, and respect for everyone involved. To the parents and caregivers: it's okay to say "no" when your heart is telling you to say "yes." It's okay to ask for help and to prioritize your own wellbeing. Loving someone with an addiction does not mean losing yourself in the process. Setting boundaries is one of the most courageous ways you can express your love — it shows your loved one that you believe in their ability to heal. This journey is not easy, but you don't have to walk it alone. Lean on the wisdom in this resource and the support of your community. Together, we can break the stigma, foster understanding, and build pathways to healing — for your loved one and for yourselves.

– Thunder Bay parent

”

### "It's not your fault"

Parents and caregivers experiencing challenges related to youth substance use can feel a range of emotions, including guilt and shame. It's important to know that substance use is complex and never somebody's "fault". Working through any feelings of guilt and shame can help you be there for your young person and look after yourself as well.



As a parent, I never thought I'd be navigating my child's substance use. I had always been vigilant, taught them well, and provided a loving and supportive home. But despite my best efforts, my child still struggled.

At first, I felt guilty and ashamed. I wondered what I had done wrong, if there was something I could have done differently. But as I looked deeper, I realized that my child's substance use wasn't my fault.

It's a disease, and it can affect anyone, regardless of their upbringing or circumstances. Trauma is often the unseen root of addiction. The painful experiences, emotional wounds and adverse events that shape a person's life can lead to a desperate search to escape, comfort or numbing. Addiction can become a misguided attempt to cope with the overwhelming feelings, memories, and emotions that linger long after the traumatic event has passed. By acknowledging the profound impact of trauma on addiction, we can begin to heal the wounds that drive this destructive cycle and offer compassionate support to those struggling to break free.

As a parent, it's crucial to recognize that you may not always be aware of your child's trauma. Often, we assume we know everything about our children's experiences and how they should respond to life's challenges. However, it's essential to remember that our children are individuals with their own unique experiences, emotions and perspectives – separate from our own.



By acknowledging this, we can create a safe space for them to share their struggles and work through their trauma together. I learned that addiction is a complex issue, influenced by genetics, environment and mental health. Rather than beating myself up over what I could have done differently, I chose to focus on being supportive and understanding. **THIS TOOK TIME!!** I sought help for my child, and for myself, and we began our journey toward recovery together.

To fellow parents who are struggling with this situation, I want you to know you are not alone. It's not your fault, and it's not a reflection of your parenting.

Let's support each other, rather than judging or blaming. Let's work together to create a community that's more compassionate, more understanding, and more supportive.

Remember, recovery is possible and it's never too late to seek help.

– Thunder Bay parent

## SUBSTANCE USE STIGMA & LANGUAGE

Imagine a teenager struggling but afraid to ask for help. They've heard people say that only "bad kids" use drugs, and they worry their teachers or doctor will judge them. Even at home, they're afraid their parents will be disappointed. So, they stay quiet, feeling more alone each day.



Stigma happens when people are treated unfairly or judged because of stereotypes. When it comes to substance use, stigma can show up as negative attitudes, shaming, or policies that make it harder for people to ask for and receive support. For young people, stigma makes it scary to reach out. Fear of judgment from teachers, doctors, or family can leave them feeling isolated and hopeless.

Because of stigma, people who use substances may:

- have a harder time accessing healthcare, education, housing, and jobs;
- feel unwelcome in spaces that are meant to help;
- be judged by professionals, making it tough to get support; and
- start believing these negative messages, making it even harder to ask for help.

Parents and caregivers can also face stigma. They might feel blamed for their child's struggles or ashamed to ask for help — even when they need it most.

**The best way to break stigma is with compassion.** When we create safe, understanding spaces for youth and families to talk, we make it easier for them to ask for and receive the support they deserve. Learn more here: [www.tbdhu.com/stopstigma](http://www.tbdhu.com/stopstigma)



## Language

Throughout this handbook, we use the terms “drugs” and “substances” interchangeably. This reflects the broad range of substances, including alcohol, that may be part of a young person’s experience. We use the terms “young person” or “youth” instead of child to acknowledge the diverse caregivers and guardians who support young people who use substances. Our language choices aim to be non-stigmatizing and person-centered. You can refer to [Overcoming Stigma Through Language \(CCSA & CAPSA\)](#) for practical language tips to reduce the stigma around substance use and addiction. **Appendix A** contains the full link for your reference.



*Addiction to Recovery. Always love. – Thunder Bay parent*  
Art activity facilitated by Ma-Nee Chacaby with support from Céline Munding

“

I never thought this would be our story — but addiction doesn't care where you come from. I've come to understand that it's not just about the substances; it's about the pain underneath. My child wasn't trying to rebel — they were trying to cope. When I saw it that way, everything changed. They didn't need punishment; they needed understanding and support.

– Thunder Bay parent

”





Youth Voices collage activity facilitated by Céline Munding of CreAction Collective.





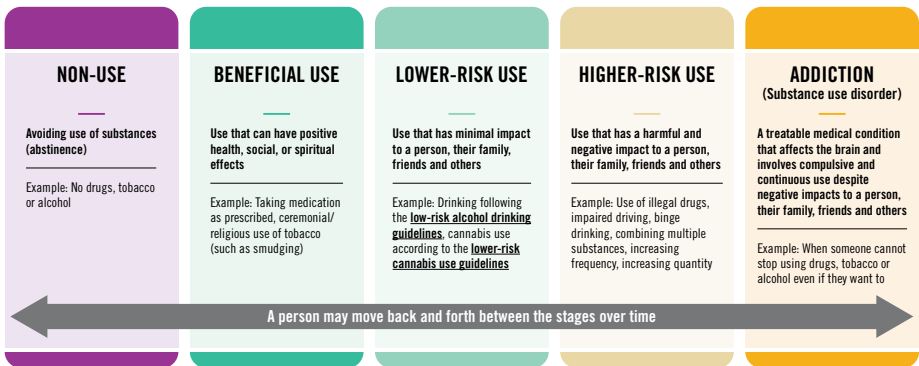
## CHAPTER 1

# Understanding Substance Use

## THE SUBSTANCE USE SPECTRUM

People use substances, such as controlled and illegal drugs, cannabis, tobacco/nicotine and alcohol for different reasons. These reasons may include: medical purposes, religious or ceremonial purposes, personal enjoyment, or to cope with stress, trauma or pain. Substance use is different for everyone and can be viewed on a spectrum with varying degrees of benefits and harms.

**Figure 1.** Substance Use Spectrum



Source: Health Canada © All rights reserved. Substance Use Spectrum Reproduced with the permission from the Minister of Health, 2024. URL: Substance Use Spectrum - Canada.ca

## HOW SUBSTANCES AFFECT THE BRAIN

All humans (and other animals) have survival-related drives, such as eating, sleeping, socializing and having children. Because these behaviours are essential to our survival, a system exists within the brain that marks them as rewarding, which reinforces these behaviours and makes us more likely to repeat them. This is known as the reward pathway. Dopamine, a chemical signal in the brain (a neurotransmitter), is the key ingredient in the reward system.

Research suggests that psychoactive substances alter this reward system by directly or indirectly increasing dopamine levels.<sup>1</sup>

When substances are taken frequently and regularly, brain circuits adapt over time. Because of the effect of substances on the reward system, the brain comes to think that the substances are essential for our survival and become needed to feel normal. This can lead to excessive 'wanting' even if the individual no longer experiences pleasure from using the substance.<sup>2</sup>



The video "**How an Addicted Brain Works**"<sup>3</sup> visually describes how drugs "hijack" the brain's reward system:

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=RZ5LH634W8s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RZ5LH634W8s)



This animated short film "**Nuggets**"<sup>4</sup> shows the progression of substance use disorder:

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=HUnGLgGRJpo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HUnGLgGRJpo)

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1 Nestler, E.J. (2005). Is there a common molecular pathway for addiction? *Nature Neuroscience*, 8: 1445-49.

2 Koob, G.F. & Volkow, N.D. (2016). Neurobiology of addiction: a neurocircuitry analysis. *Lancet Psychiatry*, 3:760-73.

3 Yale Medicine. (2022, May 23). How an Addicted Brain Works [Video]. Youtube. [www.youtube.com/watch?v=RZ5LH634W8s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RZ5LH634W8s)

4 Filmbilder & Friends. (2014, October 13). Nuggets [Video]. Youtube. [www.youtube.com/watch?v=HUnGLgGRJpo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HUnGLgGRJpo)

## TYPES OF SUBSTANCES AND THEIR EFFECTS



### STIMULANTS

Stimulants excite or speed up messages between the brain and the body. The use of stimulants can cause increased energy, faster breathing, more rapid heart rate, and higher body temperature. They can also make people feel more awake, alert, confident and energetic.

Examples: amphetamines, cocaine, crystal meth



### DEPRESSANTS

Depressants inhibit or slow down messages between the brain and the body. The use of depressants can cause lowered energy, slowed breathing, slowed heart rate, and lower body temperature. They can also make people feel more relaxed and less inhibited.

Examples: alcohol, benzodiazepines, GHB



### CANNABINOIDS

Cannabinoids inhibit or slow down the messages between the brain and the body. THC is responsible for the psychoactive effects of cannabinoids, while CBD counters these effects. THC can lead to feelings of pleasure, spontaneous laughter, increased appetite, paranoia, dry mouth, and anxiety.

Examples: cannabis (weed/pot), butane hash oil (dabs/shatter)



## OPIOIDS

Opioids inhibit or slow down messages between the brain and the body. The use of opioids can cause lowered breathing and heart rate. They stimulate the release of dopamine which can lead to pleasure and pain relief.

Examples: oxycodone, methadone, heroin, fentanyl



## EMPATHOGENS

Empathogens release dopamine and serotonin in the brain, which controls mood, appetite and sleep. The use of empathogens can increase feelings of empathy towards others and friendliness. They can cause mood swings, dehydration and depression.

Examples: MDMA, ecstasy, ethylone



## PSYCHEDELICS

Psychedelics change the brain's perception of reality. The use of psychedelics can alter a person's thoughts, sense of time, and emotions. They can also cause hallucinations, such as seeing, hearing, and feeling things that aren't there or are distorted.

Examples: psilocybin (magic mushrooms), LSD, ayahuasca



## DISSOCIATIVES

Dissociatives change the brain's perception of reality. The use of dissociatives can distort sensory perceptions, such as sight and sounds. They can also make people feel disconnected or detached from reality.

Examples: ketamine, nitrous oxide, PCP

For more information about the effects of different substances see:

[Alcohol and Drug Foundation's Interactive Drug List and Wheel.](#)

See **Appendix A** for website link.

## THE DEVELOPING BRAIN

Young people are particularly vulnerable to the effects of substances because their brains are still developing. The part of the brain called the prefrontal cortex plays a role in decision-making, emotional regulation and impulse control, and is not fully developed until their mid-20s. The brain's reward system, which drives pleasure and excitement, is highly active during adolescence. This means that young people are more drawn to risk-taking, new experiences, and instant rewards (like the temporary high from substances). They may not always think of the long-term consequences, such as:

- changes to the brain's reward system
- impacts on mental health and emotions
- impairments related to memory and learning
- increased risk of substance use disorders in adulthood

The good news is that with supports such as medications, behavioral therapies, and/or support groups, the brain has the ability to heal itself thanks to something called neuroplasticity. This is the brain's ability to form new pathways and connections.

**The roots of substance use problems are complex.**



Check out this video “**Teen Brain Development**”<sup>5</sup> from National Institute on Drug Abuse:

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=EpfnDijz2d8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EpfnDijz2d8)

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5 National Institute on Drug Abuse. (2019, March 11). Teen Brain Development [Video]. Youtube. [www.youtube.com/watch?v=EpfnDijz2d8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EpfnDijz2d8)

**It's not just about the developing brain.** The reasons people use substances and possibly develop a substance use disorder is complex. Often, there is a combination of biological, psychological and social factors that can contribute to a young person's substance use. Risk factors include genetic predispositions, adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), negative social influences, and mental health disorders.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, protective factors such as supportive relationships, self-esteem, and coping skills can help buffer the risks that a young person may experience (see **Figure 2**).

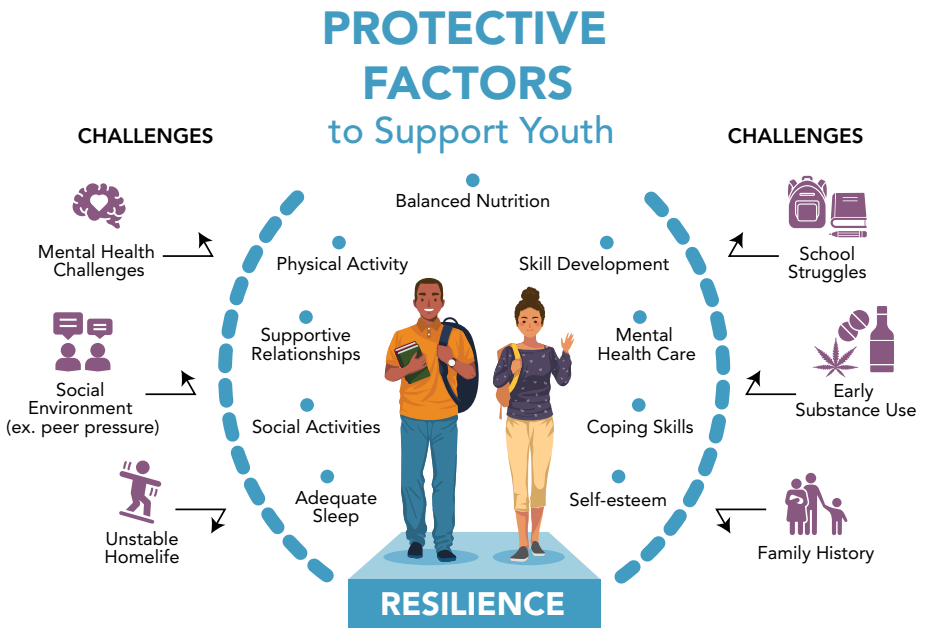
The last number of years has been tough on young people, especially since the pandemic. Many youth in our region are struggling with stress, loneliness and anxiety. Many of the challenges that Thunder Bay faces as a community have been hard on youth, such as community violence, homelessness and poverty. Youth substance use across the region tends to be higher than the provincial average, and our area has been highly impacted by the increasingly toxic drug supply.

**Substance use disorder is a chronic reoccurring health condition** that can impact anyone, regardless of income level. Among youth with substance use challenges, those with more protective factors may need fewer resources to prevent a reoccurrence (relapse), while those facing higher risks often require more treatment services and support.

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<sup>6</sup> Whitesell, M., Bachand, A., Peel, J., & Brown, M. (2013). Familial, social and individual factors contributing to risk for adolescent substance use. *Journal of Addiction Medicine*, 2013:578310.

**Figure 2.** Protective Factors to Support Youth



Adapted with permission from the New Brunswick Health Council (NBHC). Source: NBHC

It can take a long time for your young person to feel better. Recovery is not a straight line and setbacks can happen. This can feel discouraging to hear, however it's important to remember that recovery is a journey. Your young person will need to develop coping skills to deal with stress, thoughts, and cravings. This will become easier with time and practice.

In Chapter 2, we will be discussing what substance use challenges may look like in real life with your young person and how to support their basic needs.





## CHAPTER 2

# When Substance Use Becomes a Problem

### A PARENT'S PERSPECTIVE

It can be hard to know whether your young person's partying is problematic and has evolved into a substance use disorder. A lot of parents in this situation wish they could turn back time. 'If only I had known sooner', is a common reflection. It is not until we are looking back, that we realize that there were clues.

**"I thought my kid had the stomach flu when they were really going through withdrawals."**

**"They're just tired, they didn't sleep well."**

At the time, we did not have the experience to understand where the road would lead. Like you, we love our young person fiercely. Maybe also like you, we were paying attention but still missed the clues. Sometimes we know our young person so well that we filter out the possibility that they could be involved in something so dangerous and harmful. Saying to ourselves, 'not my child', can make us one of the last ones to fully see the dangerous place that our young person is in.



### **Of the parents we have encountered on this journey, these are some common thoughts:**

- We did not want to believe what we were seeing.
- We thought we could handle it on our own.
- The behaviours our young person was exhibiting did not make sense.
- It scared the crap out of us.
- We thought it was regular teenage behaviour, a blip, or a phase that they would overcome.
- We were filled with shame.
- We were out of our element.
- We did not know what to do.

One of the biggest factors that finally pushed many of us to seek outside help was that the behaviours and risks escalated quickly. What started off slowly, took up steam, and our young person tanked, hard and fast. As parents we had to grasp the reality of our young person's increasingly self-destructive behaviour. Only then could we focus on supporting them and keeping them safe from further trauma and harm.

### **The good news?**

Once we can acknowledge where our family is at, we can be one of the strongest allies in getting our young person the help they need. We have intimate knowledge of our young person's history. We LOVE them and see them as a whole person.

## SIGNS A YOUNG PERSON MAY BE STRUGGLING

Here are common changes in behaviour and signs to watch for that may indicate substance use or other challenges:

### CHANGES AT SCHOOL:

- Declining grades
- Skipping out
- Late for school

### NO LONGER INTERESTED IN:

- Hobbies
- Sports
- Music
- Family events and activities

### RELATIONSHIP CHANGES:

- Peer groups
- Boyfriend/girlfriend/partners
- Toxic relationships
- Having more than one phone

### INCREASED DESIRE FOR PRIVACY:

- Phone calls
- Social media accounts
- Personal space
- Backpack/purse

### CHANGES IN PHYSICAL APPEARANCE

- Dirty clothes
- Long sleeves
- Grubby
- Poor skin tone
- Losing weight
- Large/small pupils

### ALTERED BEHAVIOUR:

- Moody
- Aggressive
- Violent
- Overly loving and affectionate
- Overly energetic/jittery/talkative
- Unusual sleeping patterns
- Nodding off
- Lack of energy
- Picking at skin
- Self-harming behaviour
- Dishonesty
- Catastrophizing
- Paranoia
- Spending a long time in the bathroom

### ILLNESS:

- Mysterious sicknesses
- Tummy aches
- Vomiting
- No appetite

### THINGS GOING MISSING:

- Valuable items
- Jewelry
- Money/gift cards
- Electronics
- Over the counter/  
Prescription medication
- Sleeping bags, backpack

### MONEY:

- Spending more than usual
- Negotiating to borrow money
- New items, clothing, junk food, jewelry that you did not pay for

### SOCIAL SETTINGS:

- Increased time spent downtown
- Chronically late
- A noticeable increase in use of social media

### OVERLY DEFENSIVE WHEN:

- Asked about substance use
- Asked about where they have been

### IMPLAUSIBLE STORIES:

- Stories that just do not add up
- Events that seem too coincidental or random

### DRUG PARAPHERNALIA – OBVIOUS:

- Empty or full alcohol/pill bottles
- Plastic or glass tubes
- Needles
- Small baggies
- Lighters or torch
- Bongs, dab rigs, papers

### DRUG PARAPHERNALIA – NOT SO OBVIOUS:

- Bits of tin foil
- Straws
- Ash
- Brillo pads
- Pens
- Metal kitchen instruments
- Kitchen spoons
- Small plastic bottles

It might seem like this behaviour came out of nowhere. It can be scary when you do not recognize this new behaviour and it is not clear what is happening. Remember that this behaviour is likely due to their reaction to the substances they are using or to your attempts to limit their access to substances.

### Here are some tips to manage this new reality:

- **Stay calm:** show care and concern and monitor your body language and tone.
- **Prioritize safety:** seek help if the situation is beyond your control (see **Appendix A** for resources)
- **Provide options:** offer clear, safe choices to help your youth feel in control.
- **Reduce bystanders:** ask onlookers to leave to prevent further escalation.
- **Avoid empty threats:** only mention consequences you're prepared to enforce.
- **Wait for the right time:** discuss worrisome behaviours after everyone has calmed down.
- **Address threats appropriately:** focus on the young person's feelings and keep them away from any target of their aggression.

**Note:** Get help as soon as possible if a young person threatens to hurt themselves or someone else (See **Appendix A** for resources).

## HELPING YOUR YOUNG PERSON DURING DIFFICULT TIMES

When a young person is struggling with substance use, they may also face challenges like unstable housing, physical health issues, and other difficulties. They might be couch surfing, moving in and out of the home, or navigating other unknowns. As caregivers, it can be hard to know how to help, especially when they are in active addiction. Meeting their basic needs — like food, shelter, and medical care — can be a vital way to support them, strengthen your connection, and keep them as safe as possible. Here are some ways you can help your young person during difficult times:

### Physical Needs:

- **Food and hydration:** providing food and water, gift cards and ordering from food delivery services are a great way to help support your loved one.
- **Safe shelter:** ensure they have a safe place to sleep, even if it can't be in your home. Help find temporary housing or shelter.
- **Basic hygiene:** offer access to showers, laundry facilities (help them with funds or a ride to a laundromat). Provide hygiene essentials like toothbrushes, toothpaste and soap.





When my child struggled with addiction in another city, I found ways to support them from afar. I sent care packages with essentials like non-perishable food, toothbrushes, toothpaste and toilet paper — things that often fall through the cracks during addiction. I also ordered items on Amazon and had them shipped directly to their address. Sometimes, I'd even send pizza to make sure they had a hot meal. These small gestures helped me feel more connected and supportive during a difficult time.

– Thunder Bay parent

### Emotional Needs:

- **Unconditional love:** let them know you love and care about them, regardless of their substance use. They may not believe you, as there can be a lot of shame associated with it. Be as honest and true as you can. Tell them often and in different ways so they start to understand that you are there for them.
- **Non-judgmental listening:** listen to their struggles and feelings without judgment. Avoid rescuing behaviours (e.g. fixing their problems, lying for them, etc.). They may not want to be rescued; they just may need to chat.
- **Emotional validation:** acknowledge their emotions, even if you don't agree with their choices.



## Practical Needs:

- **Medical attention:** Encourage them to seek medical attention. Go with your child to advocate for them. The medical system is difficult to navigate. People struggling with substance use should be treated with respect and compassion. You can ensure this happens if you are there with them.
- **Transportation:** Help them find transportation to appointments, meetings, counseling and support groups. Help to reduce the barriers to attend these types of events.
- **Basic necessities:** help to provide essential items like clothing, blankets or personal care products.

Remember that supporting a young person with substance use issues is a long-term commitment. Be patient, flexible and compassionate and prioritize your own well-being throughout the journey (see

**Chapter 6** – Support for Yourself).



### In the thick of it

I started off thinking this was a phase. Teenagers go through stages, emotions, rebelliousness... right? But slowly, she started slipping away. As a parent you try to figure it out, but this is your first time around.

I was so emotionally unprepared for these struggles. I assumed that this could be fixed with more control, a heavy hand, and more discipline. I didn't ask — Are you ok? Why are you using substances? How are you feeling? Instead, I did what I thought parents should do — You don't deserve to go out! You've been skipping school! You aren't doing your part! Do better. Be more respectful. Hammer down. I wish I'd known I was pushing her away.



I've heard that addiction can feel like a tornado. The closer you get to it, the harder it is to live life without chaos. My life was consumed with my daughter's addiction. I had trouble working. I had trouble being present for the rest of my family. I didn't connect with my friends any longer. It was always — Where is she? Is she ok? Is she eating? Does she have anyone? Is she alive?

I told myself — I'll go to a support group. I will sit and listen and figure out how to fix my child. That's how it will work. If I work hard enough, if I figure out just the right thing to say and do, I can make it all better. I'm not the problem, no it couldn't be me. My way is the right way, my way will make you happy, I promise.

Why? Why? Why? You will likely ask yourself that question over and over again. The answer may be unknown. The answer may be very complex. Addiction is not simple; if it were, we would have all the answers by now.

The support group didn't help me heal my child. But it did help heal me. To learn to love the person and not the behaviour. To understand that I can't CONTROL this, I can't CHANGE this, and I didn't CAUSE this. The three C's to live by.

If I could give advice to you, the parent going through this now it would be this. Do everything with love. Don't blame, shame, yell, scream, or beg. Ask the hard questions with love. Have enough left in your emotional tank, for when your child is ready for change. Take the breaks now, give yourself grace, and don't ever change your phone number.

– Thunder Bay parent



## CHAPTER 3

# Harm Reduction

### WHAT IS HARM REDUCTION?

Harm reduction is a part of everyday life. Every time we take extra steps to stay safe when doing an activity that has some risk – such as wearing a seat belt while driving – we are using harm reduction tools and strategies.

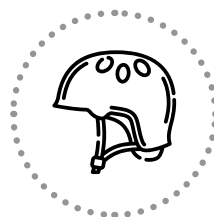
### Examples of harm reduction



Sun Screen



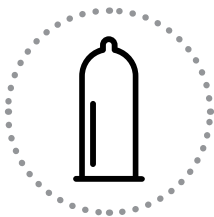
Seat Belts



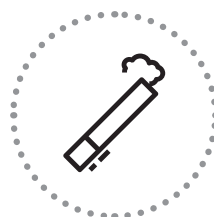
Bike Helmets



Speed Limits



Condom Use



Cigarette Filters

## KEY VALUES OF HARM REDUCTION

- Focuses on decreasing harms
- Understands that substance use is complex and includes a range of behaviours
- Recognizes that some activities and ways of using substances are safer than others
- Gives people choice and access to options that help to keep people safe, alive and healthy
- Recognizes that people are doing the best they can with what they have

Harm reduction isn't just about safety measures. It also involves a compassionate, non-judgmental approach to health, recognizing that drug use is a complex issue. Harm reduction services aim to minimize risks for people who use drugs by providing supplies, sharing information, and offering support through community connections. These services are designed to meet people where they are, helping them access health and social resources.

In our role supporting a young person who uses substances, harm reduction really boils down to this: **Keeping a person alive so that they can receive the help they need and eventually find a path to recovery that works for them.**



As a parent, harm reduction is the foundation of everything that we do. It can be divided into two main categories:

1. Harm reduction for your young person who is using substances
2. Harm reduction for yourself and the other people in your family circle

Much of the time, these two efforts conflict with one another. As you are trying to care for your young person who is using substances, you sacrifice yourself, and your other family members may get hurt too (see **Chapter 9** – Family Relationships).

## HARM REDUCTION STRATEGIES

Here are some harm reduction tips that we, as parents, have used with our young people who have struggled with substance use:

**Have an open dialogue with your young person about their substance use.** Your young person will also have knowledge to offer that may help you better understand them and their substance use. The goal of harm reduction is to keep youth as safe as possible while meeting them where they're at. Letting them know you care about their well-being, no matter what, can make a big difference.



**Here are some harm reduction strategies parents can share about any substance.**

- Start low, go slow – use a small amount first to see how it affects you.
- Avoid mixing substances – combining alcohol, drugs, or medications can increase risks.
- Stay hydrated & nourished – dehydration and lack of food can make substance effects worse.
- Take breaks & listen to your body – regular use can increase risks. Taking breaks can help avoid dependence.
- Be wary of the risks of the toxic drug supply – many substances even ones that look familiar, may be contaminated with fentanyl or other dangerous additives.
- Be aware of your tolerance – the body's ability to handle substances can change, especially after periods of not using.
- Use in a safe place – be with trusted people and avoid using alone. If using with someone, staggering or alternating their substance use.
- Use drug-checking services or test strips – even if they got substances from someone that they trust (if drug checking is available where you live).
- Practice safe sex – as there is a greater risk of unplanned pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections.



### **Ask them how they might handle an emergency. You can encourage them to:**

- Call for help if a friend may be having an overdose and stay with the person (and ask their friends to do the same for them).
- Use the Lifeguard App if they are using alone. The app will contact emergency responders if they become unresponsive in the event of an overdose. <https://lifeguarddh.com/>
- Have and know how to use a naloxone kit. Give them one for their backpack. Talk to them about how their tolerance is typically lower after periods of non-use (e.g. after treatment, incarceration, detox, etc.) and that overdose is a greater risk during those times.



**As a parent who's walked this journey, I want you to know that surrounding yourself with people that practice harm reduction, compassion and empathy is a game-changer. Moving away from fear and frustration to love and connection will likely result in a better relationship with your child, and allow you to manage your day-to-day life a little better. A little kindness can go a long way for both you and your child.**

**– Thunder Bay parent**

### **Harm reduction for your young person who is using illicit substances (street drugs)**

**If your young person is using street drugs, their risk of harm — especially overdose — is much higher.** The Thunder Bay District has been highly impacted by an increasingly toxic drug supply. Here are some harm reduction strategies that we, as parents, have used with our young people:



**Pick up new harm reduction supplies.** Or encourage your young person to pick some up. These will help prevent blood-borne infections such as HIV or Hepatitis C. Talk to them about the impact of sharing supplies, not just needles but straws, pipes, bongs, etc. Practice safe disposal of supplies. Get a sharps container or use a plastic milk jug to hold needles, and wear gloves when picking up needles and related items, preferably using tweezers or tongs. They can be taken to a public health unit, hospital or wherever you pick up supplies. Supplies and needle disposal locations across Ontario can be found here: <https://ohrdp.ca/find-supplies/>.

**Get trained to use naloxone.** Always have a kit accessible even if you aren't sure they are using opioids (see **Chapter 4** – Overdose/ Drug Poisoning). If naloxone is used, the young person should still go to the hospital. The naloxone wears off before the opioid does and they are at risk of overdosing if they are not watched carefully. Watch for the naloxone expiry date and make sure your kit is complete.

**Be with them if you are able.** Ask your young person if you can go with them when they use, or if they can keep the door unlocked. Have your naloxone ready. Have your phone ready to call 911. Take a first aid class to brush up on your CPR. Having your young person use in your home instead of outside is harm reduction. It will likely be brutal and painful for you to be with them as they use substances, but they have a better chance of staying alive. Encourage them to tell you if they are going to meet someone to get drugs and try to discuss it without an agenda. Recognize that keeping them safe is more important than how you feel about what they are doing.



**Consider opioid agonist treatment (OAT).** OAT can help youth struggling with opioid use by providing stability, reducing harm, and supporting long term recovery. Some examples of OAT include suboxone and methadone. These medications can help reduce withdrawal symptoms and cravings. This can also help them engage in other types of treatment such as therapy, counselling and other support.

**Safely store medications in your home.** Do not leave any in your medicine cabinet, including cough syrup and cold medicine. Lock up your medicine as well as money and valuables — this can minimize conflict and reduce harm. You may find that access to other substances such as cooking spray should also be controlled. Encourage other family members to educate themselves about safe storage practices and not to share leftover medications.

**Educate ourselves and reflect on personal biases** and leave those at the door when supporting our young person.

And finally, **do fun things.** Support your young person to find things to do that do not involve substances. Maybe they like to go to the beach, watch movies, workout, or cook. Try to remember together what they liked to do before substance use became such a big part of their lives. Any new opportunity can be a building block for rebuilding their future. These can be great activities to enable as you encourage them to find a healthier path.

All of these harm reduction ideas may be pushing you way out of your comfort zone. Some of them could look like falling into that parent-shaming term of enabling. However, harm reduction is not giving up, it's fighting to help keep your young person safe. The quicker that you give up the fight against your young person and focus on reducing the substance use harms, the quicker you can get on the same side and work towards restoring their health.



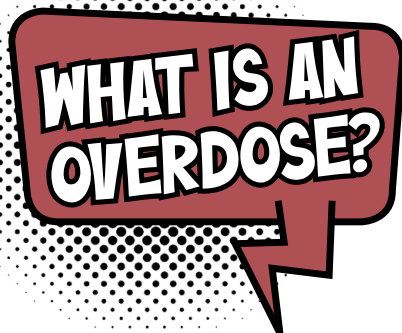
Youth Voices collage activity facilitated by Céline Munding of CreAction Collective.

## CHAPTER 4

# Overdose/Drug Poisoning

In Chapter 3 we described harm reduction strategies that work to keep young people safer while they are using drugs. In recent years, the toxicity of illicit drugs has increased the risk of overdose/drug poisoning dramatically. This increase has been linked to fentanyl, a potent synthetic opioid (20-40 times stronger than heroin, and 100 times stronger than morphine) that is contaminating the illicit drug supply. Thunder Bay District is no exception to this trend, in fact, we are more affected than other regions in Ontario. In the fight to keep people safe, naloxone is a critical tool in our harm reduction toolkit.

Overdose/drug poisoning means there is more of a substance (or combination of substances) in the body than it can handle. People can overdose on lots of things, including alcohol, over the counter medications, prescription medications, opioids, or a mix of substances. Opioids are a pain reliever. When too much of an opioid is in the body or a combination of substances, they can slow down the body's normal functions such as breathing and heart rate. When someone is having an opioid overdose, they can stop breathing and may die if they don't get help.

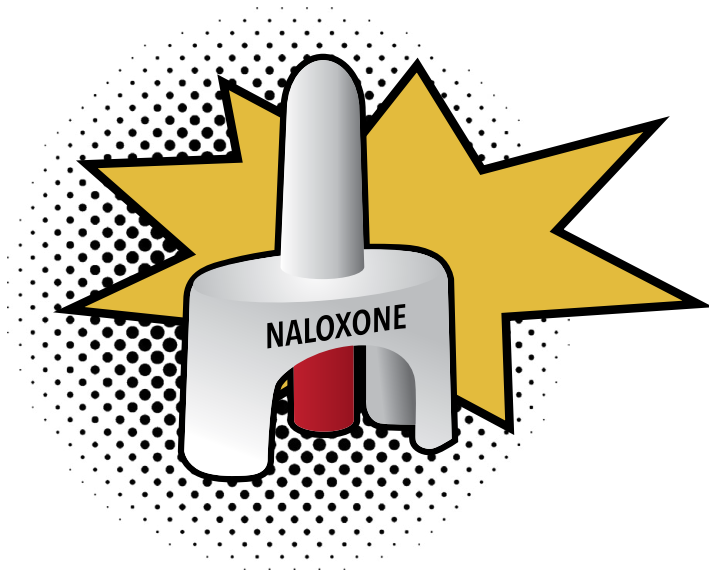


## WHAT IS NALOXONE?

Naloxone (Narcan®) is a medicine that can quickly reverse an opioid overdose. If someone is given naloxone when they are overdosing, naloxone can temporarily (i.e. for a short time) reverse the effects of the opioids. Naloxone begins working 1 to 5 minutes after it is given and lasts for about 45 minutes. After the naloxone has worn off, it is possible for someone to continue to overdose from the opioids still in their system.

### **Remember:**

- Naloxone reverses the effects of opioids for a short time and is TEMPORARY.
- Naloxone ONLY works on opioids.
- Naloxone starts working within 1 to 5 minutes and lasts about 45 minutes.
- You can keep overdosing after the naloxone wears off.

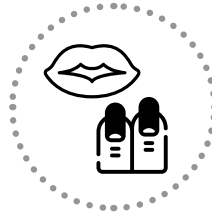


## SIGNS OF AN OVERDOSE

### Signs of an opioid overdose



**Cannot be woken up**  
or not moving



**Discoloration**  
of lips and nails



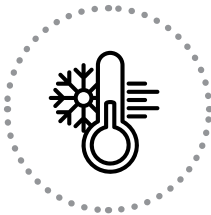
**Breathing**  
slow or absent



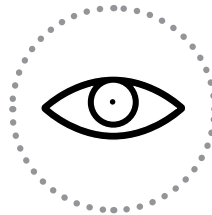
**Choking**  
or coughing, gurgling,  
or snoring sounds



**Dizziness**  
and disorientation



**Cold**  
or clammy skin



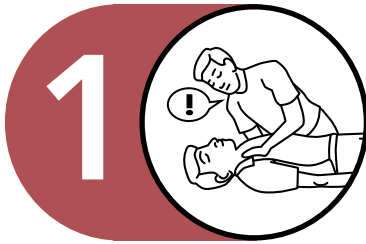
**Pupils**  
extremely small

## Stimulant or hallucinogen overdose

- Very fast breathing
- Fast heartbeat
- Heavy sweating
- Chest pains
- Very large pupils
- Muscle cramps
- Dizziness or headache
- Difficulty peeing
- Longer more intense trip
- Muscle spasms/shaking
- Seizures
- Catatonic syndrome (person sitting in a trance-like state)
- Foaming at the mouth

**\*\*if you're not sure – use naloxone anyway\*\***

## OVERDOSE RESPONSE



### SHOUT AND SHAKE

- SHOUT the person's name.
- SHAKE their shoulders.
- Do not bang their head.
- NOTE: If after 15-30 seconds, they are not responding, they may be overdosing.



### CALL 911

- Call 911, even if you aren't sure.
- Say exactly where the person is.
- Tell the paramedics what steps you have taken and what substances are involved.



### STEPS TO GIVE NALOXONE

1. Take out naloxone nasal spray.
2. Peel open package where it says "Peel Here".
3. Make sure the person is on their back.
4. Tilt head back.
5. Hold nasal spray between two fingers with thumb on bottom of the nasal spray.
6. Gently insert nasal spray in nose until fingers touch the nostrils.
7. Press plunger to release the naloxone.
8. If the first dose of Naloxone doesn't work; give a second dose, if you have one.





## **GIVE RESCUE BREATHS AND/OR CHEST COMPRESSIONS**

If 2 doses of naloxone do not work, give rescue breaths and/or chest compressions.

### **RESCUE BREATHS:**

- Tilt their head back.
- Place barrier over mouth (if available).
- Plug their nose and give 2 breaths through their mouth. Breath should be big enough to make the person's chest rise.
- Continue to breathe for the person at a rate of 1 breath every 5 seconds.

### **CHEST COMPRESSIONS:**

- Place your hands on top of one another in the middle of the person's chest, keeping your arms straight.
- Push fast, push hard, with no interruptions.



## **EVALUATE THE SITUATION**

If you have more than 2 on hand, give another dose of naloxone if the person is still not breathing after 2 minutes.

Stay with the person until an ambulance or medical help arrives.

**We encourage you to print/tear out this sheet and stick it on your wall somewhere in case of an emergency.**

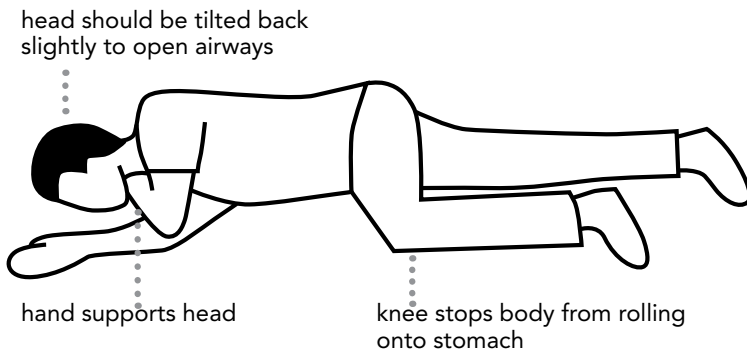


## Do Not Leave the Person Alone

If you have no other choice but to leave them, put them in the recovery position:

### RECOVERY POSITION

If the person begins breathing on their own, or if you have to leave them alone, put them in the recovery position



### When the naloxone starts working, the person may:

- Wake up.
- Be upset or want to use again.
- Be confused or disoriented.
- Need to be told that they were overdosing.
- Experience mild to severe withdrawal.

The person could go back into an overdose as the naloxone wears off. It is important that the person does not use more substances when they wake up.

## GOOD SAMARITAN ACT

Under Canada's [Good Samaritan Drug Overdose Act](#), if you seek medical help for yourself or for someone else who has overdosed, neither of you will be charged for possessing or using drugs nor will anyone else at the scene. For the full link, check **Appendix A**.

### **The law DOES provide protection against charges for:**

- Possessing drugs for your own use
- Violating conditions of your parole, bail, probation or conditional sentence for a simple drug possession charge

### **The law does NOT provide protection against charges for:**

- Selling illegal drugs (trafficking): Police may suspect this if you have a large amount of drugs, cash or items like scales, baggies, and debt lists.
- Offences other than drug possession
- Any outstanding arrest warrants
- Violating conditions of your parole, bail, probation, or conditional sentence for an offence that is not simple possession

### **Police may not always know about the law's protections.**

If you need legal help, call:

**1 (800) 668-8258 (toll-free)** for Legal Aid Ontario or

**1 (855) 947-5255 (toll-free)** for Law Society Referral Service.

## After an Overdose:

Living through or responding to an overdose can be difficult and traumatic experience. It is important to talk to someone you are comfortable with about it. Reach out to a friend or loved one, someone who is a part of your personal support system. An Employee Assistance Program can offer support as well, if you have access. See **Appendix A** for a list of caregiver supports.

## WHERE TO GET NALOXONE

- Thunder Bay: Superior Points Harm Reduction Program: (807) 621-7861 or (807) 621-7862
- Thunder Bay District: call your nearest branch office [www.tbdhu.com/contact](http://www.tbdhu.com/contact)
- Pharmacies: [www.ontario.ca/page/where-get-free-naloxone-kit](http://www.ontario.ca/page/where-get-free-naloxone-kit)

## Where to Get Naloxone Training

- TBDHU training guide: <https://bit.ly/naloxonetrainingguide>
- Naloxone training is also available for free online (kits not provided)
  - » <https://sja.ca/en/training/oprt-training/e-learning-course>

Having naloxone is so important: Have it with you at all times. And have many kits accessible in your home with instructions on how to use it. Remember where you put it. Keep it in a central location. With the increasing potency of drugs, one kit may not be enough. Ask for several kits when you are getting naloxone to be prepared.



I received a phone call at work that made my world stop. My 14 year old child was missing. They were missing in one of the biggest cities in Canada, and I was a province away. Panic, despair, and fear flooded my body.

Earlier that year, my child was hospitalized due to a drug overdose. Their use continued and involved new drugs, mixing drugs, alcohol poisoning, and exposure to violence. As a mother, I told myself I had to be strong, but on the inside, I was deteriorating. Trying to manage this on my own only made my deterioration visible. I carried a substantial amount of worry, guilt and shame. How could this happen to my baby? Why was this happening? I had to stop ruminating on what I could have done differently because it was not helping the situation. The facts: My child was using drugs. My child was missing. And I could not change either of those things at that moment. I reached out to peers and other parents for support. I needed to understand and accept what was in my control, and what was not. I had to take care of myself.

Thankfully, my child was found safe, and today they do not use drugs. But it was not easy. I had to shift my perspective, face hard truths, and meet my child where they were at. The childhood and life I had envisioned for them did not align with the reality of their life. That was very hard to accept. I had to learn how to parent a teenager with a substance use issue. To be there for my child, I had to be willing to talk about difficult things. I had to listen to them. I had to let go of unrealistic expectations, set boundaries, and take everything one day at a time.



Being a parent or a caregiver is a great responsibility. Witnessing a loved one struggle is painful for us. Remember to take a moment to breathe, and try to be gentle on yourself.

You are not alone in this.

– Thunder Bay parent



Youth Voices collage activity facilitated by Céline Munding of CreAction Collective.





## CHAPTER 5

# Navigating the System

The “system” refers to the institutions that you might encounter as you look to support your young person. Navigating the medical, legal and education systems can be difficult, infuriating and exhausting. “The system is broken” is a common phrase that you might hear from parents in similar situations. A clear path can be hard to find.

Often the first step is reaching out to someone to ask about what help is available. From here you may hear about web sites or parenting courses or brochures. This can be helpful but can also feel demoralizing and minimizing when you are the main advocate for your young person and their needs are immediate and dire.

One thing to keep in mind is that you can access a lot of services on your own (see **Chapter 6** – Support for Yourself). Many of us have found that the most helpful first step in understanding how to navigate the system is to join a support group. There you will meet other parents and caregivers who are on the same journey, who may be a few months or years down the road. They will know about the systems and services firsthand and can share what has worked for them and what has not.





*The danger of isolation and power of connection. – Thunder Bay parent  
Art activity facilitated by Ma-Nee Chacaby with support from Céline Munding*

## NAVIGATING THE MEDICAL SYSTEM

If your young person is open to treatment, you can support them by helping with paperwork, connecting them with supports, and following up on referrals. Many families start by reaching out to a family doctor, nurse practitioner, or walk-in clinic for guidance. Counselling programs can also be a helpful starting point, offering assessments, treatment planning, and referrals to detox, outpatient programs, or live-in treatment. If withdrawal management (detox) is needed, spaces can fill up quickly, so calling daily can improve the chances of getting in. Safe beds and safer sobering sites may also be available for short-term support, offering a safe place to stay while stabilizing.





Social workers, system navigators, and crisis response teams can provide guidance on the next steps, helping you and your young person understand what supports are available. Peer support groups can also be very helpful, to offer insight from other parents who have been through this before. The process isn't always straightforward, but you're not alone — there are people and resources ready to help you and your young person take the next step toward care. See **Appendix A** for a list of services that can help connect you to the right supports based on your young person's needs and eligibility.

## YOUR YOUNG PERSON'S RIGHTS

In Ontario, under the Health Care Consent Act, there is no set age when a person is considered capable of giving consent to a medical treatment. In other words, even if a person is a minor (under the age of 19), they can consent to their own medical care if they understand what the treatment involves, why it is being offered, and the associated risks and benefits. They can accept or refuse treatment without parental consent. They can also choose to keep information about their personal health private.

As a parent or caregiver, it can be a shock to realize that you do not have control over whether they get help to address their substance use. See **Appendix A** for a link to an FAQ on the [Ontario Caregiver](#) website for more information on privacy and consent for caregivers supporting someone in the mental health and addiction system.



“

We felt stuck, knowing that our son needed help with climbing out from under the burden of substance use, but we were also frustrated at being unable to effectively advocate within the health care system. Without our son's legal consent to sharing access to his medical records, we would often be shut out of communication with the mental health counsellors and physicians he would see, in spite of our understanding of the warning signs and crisis points in his opioid addiction. Watching him struggle while being constrained by legal limits to support him was exhausting. Our way forward was to do as much as possible to stay involved, talking openly with him and without judgment about substance use and harm reduction while enduring stigma for being caring parents.

– Thunder Bay parent

”



## ADVOCATING WITHIN THE SCHOOL SYSTEM

If your young person gets into trouble at school due to substance use, it's important to advocate for their continued connection to education. Schools may respond with discipline, but they also have a role in supporting students.

- Ask questions and seek support – Speak with the principal, school counselor, or mental health nurse to understand the situation and what support is available.
- Emphasize support over punishment – Push for responses that focus on education, counseling, or harm reduction rather than exclusion from school.
- Know your rights and options – Schools in Ontario offer supports like alternative education programs, student success teams, and mental health services. Ask what's available.
- Stay involved – Regular communication with teachers and staff can help ensure your young person stays engaged and gets the help they need.

Keeping a young person connected to school is critical for their well-being and future opportunities. If needed, you can also seek outside advocacy support from youth and family organizations.





If I'd only known that school administration could have done more in responding to my son's substance use in and around the high school, I could maybe have intervened to insist that the school principal refer him for diversionary mental health and addictions treatment instead of ordering suspensions from school. Suspensions that would leave him at loose ends, the underlying reasons for his substance use hidden, stigma associated with substance use and school suspensions heightened, and interest in school diminished.

The "system is broken" is so evident as I think on where the gaps were in dealing with my son's school years' experimentation with alcohol and prescription and illicit drugs. With so little classroom teaching in my son's school on the risks of substance use, and little to no discussion of mental health and addictions diversionary treatment alternatives, it's not surprising, in retrospect, that they relied instead on suspension, to simply get rid of the problem student while protecting their reputation as a 'no tolerance' institution.

Things may have changed since then, but still gaps exist between systems – educational, legal and medical – that are more than a parent can piece together. I share my experience to urge caregivers to be present in the school setting, ask questions on school policies and practices, intervene when needed for your young person struggling with substance use and advocate for full-round support for them.

– Thunder Bay parent

## NAVIGATING THE LEGAL SYSTEM

Supporting a young person in the legal system can be very challenging. It also can seem that, as parents, we are excluded from the legal process and it is hard to get answers or results. Here are some things that we can share that have helped us. Please note this is not intended as legal advice and every situation is different. What might be a good fit for one person might not be for another.

- Your young person may be assigned a lawyer, or you may have to contact legal aid to get legal representation for your young person. You may also hire private counsel at your expense if it is within your means.
- The lawyer represents your young person and their rights. They do not have to communicate with you or share anything that your young person has not consented for them to share.
- If possible, attend court appearances to be kept in the loop and hear what is happening with your young person's case.
- Parents may also address the court (judge/Crown counsel) directly.
- Judges appreciate the input of family members when making decisions about a young person.
- Find out who your young person's probation officer is and keep in contact with them. They can be an excellent resource and provide you extra support and resources.
- Prior to sentencing, there will be a pre-sentence report compiled by the probation officer. They will go over your family history, as well as your young person's academic, health and substance use history. Any other relevant information will be presented to the judge for consideration when deciding on what legal ramifications they will be imposing.

- Your young person's case might be diverted from the criminal courts (e.g., court diversion and restorative justice programs).
- If your young person requires mental health support, ask that they be referred to Youth or Adult Forensic Psychiatric Services. Their team has a psychiatrist, psychologist, counsellors, mental health social worker, psychiatric nurse and family therapists.
- Do not give up. You will most likely have to keep advocating for your young person to get results.

## WHEN CHILD PROTECTION SERVICES IS INVOLVED

- Child Protection Services (CPS) may become involved if a youth's substance use raises concerns about safety or lack of support at home. This may include situations where parents are unaware, unable to provide care, or facing their own challenges with substance use. Ideally, CPS is focussed on support and resources rather than punishment.
- If CPS is involved, it can feel overwhelming. You have the right to ask questions, be part of decisions, and get support. It's okay to ask for help — for yourself, too. Parent advocacy groups, harm reduction services, and legal aid can help you understand your rights and navigate the system.

### If you ever find yourself involved with child protection services:

- **Stay calm.** It's easy to let fear or anger take over, but reacting emotionally can make things worse.
- **Communicate your concerns** in a way that can be received with respect. Whether you feel the system is unfair or you are scared of what might happen, do your best to express yourself clearly and calmly so your voice can be heard.

- **Ask for information.** Knowledge is power. Often, fear comes from the unknown, and once you have the facts, those fears can subside. If you are unsure about a situation, ask the caseworker to explain your rights and options.
- **Seek support and advocacy.** You don't have to face these situations alone. Having an advocate, a trusted friend, or a support worker present can help ensure your rights aren't violated and provide emotional support throughout the process. Many communities have legal aid services, family advocates, or cultural supports available — use them.
- **Involve your young person when appropriate.** If it's safe and in their best interest, include them in discussions about their situations. This helps them feel heard, reduces fear, and allows them to express their needs and feel less overwhelmed.



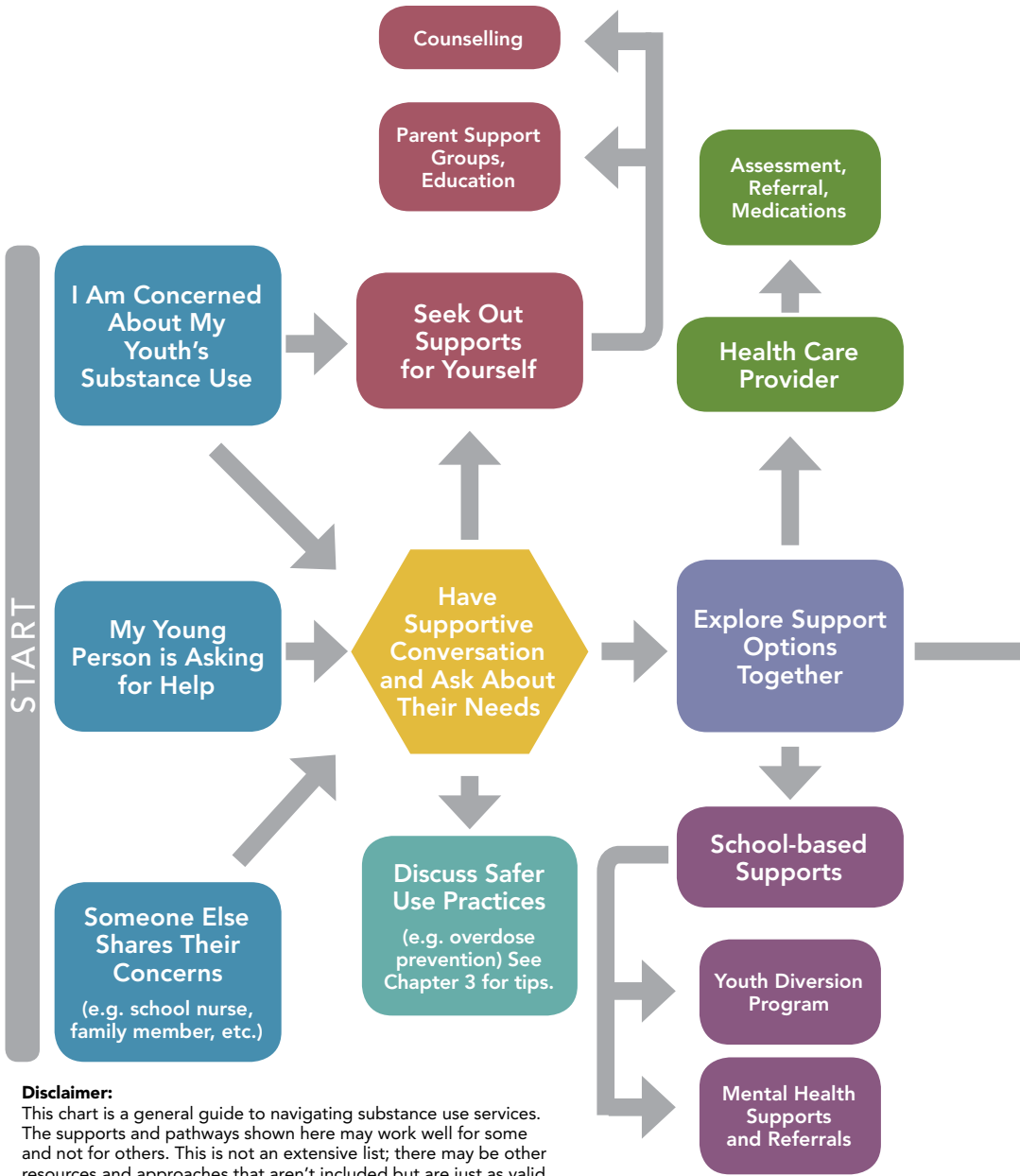
My experience with child protection services has been from both ends. On one occasion, they were called on me, and on another, I was asked to care for my nephew. Like many others, I have developed a standoffish attitude toward these agencies — not just because of my personal experiences, but because of the history, the stories I've heard from others, and what we see in the media. These things create fear and discomfort, reinforcing the idea that our control is being taken away. And when we feel that our families are being threatened, it is human nature to react to loss of control defensively.

But the truth is, we do have control. Even in situations where we feel powerless, we still have control over ourselves, our actions, our words, and how we respond to what's happening.

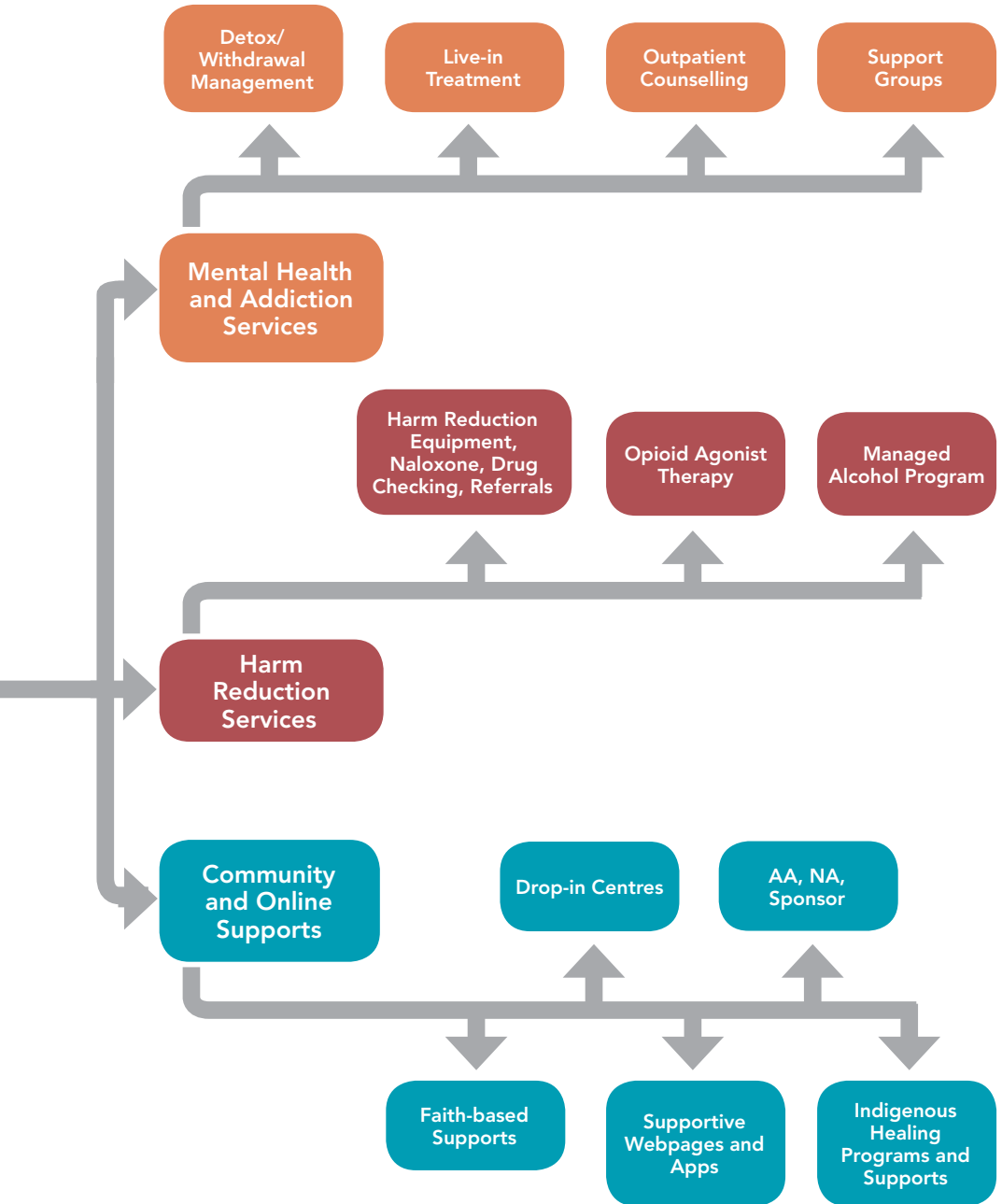
That's important to remember.

– Thunder Bay parent

## NAVIGATING SYSTEMS FLOW CHART

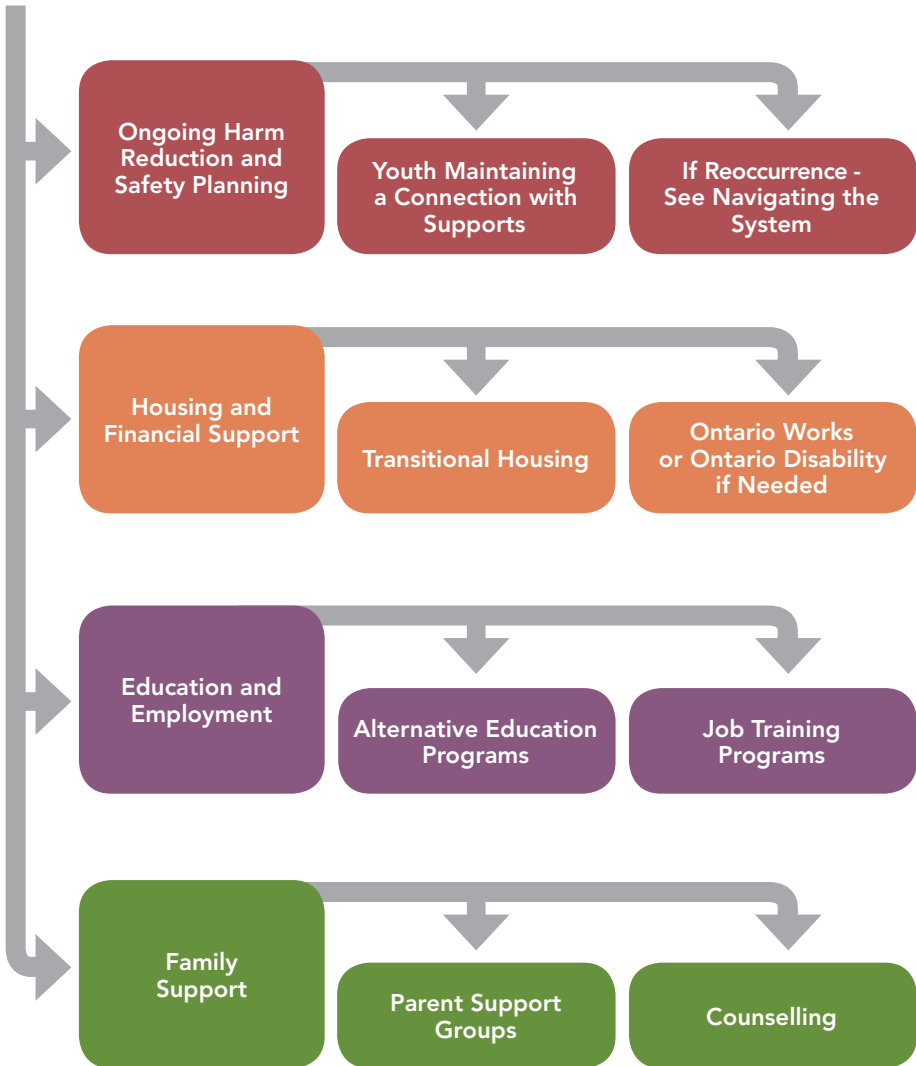






See Appendix A for resources.

## Maintaining Stability







## CHAPTER 6

# Support for Yourself

Previous chapters in this handbook were focused on supporting your young person, but along the way we acknowledged how important it is that we support ourselves as parents and caregivers. This chapter draws from real experiences to offer some ideas on how to do that.



**You can't pour from an empty cup. Take care of yourself first, so you can be the best version of yourself for your child, even in the midst of their struggle.**

**– Thunder Bay parent**

### **What can you do for yourself when you are in the trenches?**

If you stop doing things that matter to you, take some time to reflect on what you enjoy doing. Make a list. Look at your calendar. Reach out to a friend for a walk. This can be a shift that starts you into a more regular routine. You may not be ready to do everything on your list, but you can start with just one thing.

## **SELF-CARE STRATEGIES**

### **Parent/Caregiver education groups**

Educate yourself. The more you understand about this illness, the better equipped you are to manage it. Parent education groups provide insight into the teenage developing brain, the effects substances can have, and can offer new ways to approach, communicate, and stay connected to your young person.

## Parent/Caregiver support groups

Join a parent/caregiver support group. It's an opportunity to find other parents who understand what you are going through. Many parents find it harder to relate to friends and relatives whose experiences with their children are very different. You can learn from parents whose struggles are more or less challenging than your own and form new friendships. We encourage you to talk to the group facilitator about the kinds of situations that the parents in the group are experiencing before you attend, so you can find the best fit for you.



**Remember, it's essential to acknowledge that supporting a child with addiction is a challenging and ongoing process. Seeking guidance from professionals, SUPPORT GROUPS (this really helped me) and loved ones can help navigate these complexities and provide the emotional support your child needs. Addiction is not easy to fix... if it were, it would be fixed by now!**

**– Thunder Bay parent**

## Counselling

There are several agencies that offer individual or family counselling. Being able to speak one-on-one with someone about your own experience can help. A counselor can validate the intensity of your experience and offer helpful skills, strategies, and direction.

## Reaching out in your community

If you are feeling overwhelmed and exhausted, it can be harder to take care of yourself and your loved one(s). Slow down, rest, and when you are ready, reach out to others who can understand and validate your journey. Reaching out to school staff, local police, or social workers can sometimes be helpful. Be brave and reach out. Every challenging moment is a learning opportunity.

## Spiritual practices

Spiritual practices may offer parents strength and comfort when supporting a youth struggling with substance use. Whether through meditation, ceremony, prayer, mindfulness, or connecting with nature, these practices help reduce stress and bring a sense of peace. Taking time for reflection or seeking support from a spiritual community can help parents to stay grounded, regain hope, and support their youth with patience and understanding.



**Healing and wellness must be holistic. If we imagine ourselves as consisting of four parts — our physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual selves — for wellness to be maintained we should care for all these parts of our being. Healing is often associated with our bodies, minds, and hearts, but it is our spirit that sustains wellness.**

**For those struggling with substance use, and for caregivers supporting them, wellness must be intentional. Addiction, and the chaos that often comes with it, can take over our lives. Whether you are the one suffering or the one supporting, if you do not actively work on maintaining wellness, the unmanageability of addiction can consume everything.**

**For me, traditional healing practices have played a central role in maintaining my wellness. Sweat lodge, ceremony, and connection to spirit have given me strength when I needed it most. But healing looks different for everyone. Some may find strength through church, prayer, being with nature, spending time with loved ones, or simply doing something that lifts their spirit. What matters is that we honor our spirit's needs — because when we neglect our spirit, we weaken the foundation that keeps us well.**



As caregivers, we sometimes pour everything into supporting the person struggling, forgetting that we need healing too. You cannot give from an empty cup. Maintaining balance in your own life — whether through cultural practices, community support, or self-care — is just as important as supporting your loved one.

– Thunder Bay parent

### Self-care suggestions provided by parents in Thunder Bay.





## Keeping a journal

Keeping a personal journal can be a good way to see change and progress over time. Some things in your journal might include:

- Count the gems: tracking small wins
- Vent: describe those days when things are not going well
- Be the observer: practice being observant and describe the details of what you are seeing. Practice being objective to give yourself a break from the emotion of the situation
- Make a list of ways to care for yourself
- Make a list of things you can control and things you cannot
- Set small goals and celebrate each achievement

## Setting boundaries

Set flexible boundaries with your young person and accept that these will change. Sometimes you may need to set firm boundaries. Sometimes you may feel like the passive parent. It can be scary but try it anyway. Get to know your limits and be kind to yourself in the process. You are doing your best.



**One of the most difficult yet important lessons I've learned is that setting boundaries is NOT an act of rejection — it is an act of love. When you set clear, compassionate boundaries, you protect not only yourself but also your loved one. Boundaries help create a space where accountability and healing can begin. They remind your loved one that while their actions may be influenced by addiction, they are still responsible for the choices they make. If we protect them from the harms they've created, we eliminate their desire to rise above.**

**– Thunder Bay parent**



## CHAPTER 7

# Staying Connected

It can be hard to know how to connect with your young person, especially when you do not fully understand what they are going through. In this chapter, we will share some insights about what it's like to be a parent in this situation, how to talk to your young person with compassion and build connection that opens possibilities for healing and recovery.



**Addiction is not just a disease of the brain, but a symptom of a deeper hunger — a hunger for connection, for meaning, for love. In its darkest corners, addiction is the opposite of connection; it's isolation, disconnection and loneliness. But with compassion, support and courage, we transform this isolation into connection and find our way back to the love, care and community that we all deserve.**

**– Johann Hari**

## YOU DON'T NEED ALL THE ANSWERS

You may not have a deep understanding of drugs and their effects. Further, your young person might not be sharing the whole story with you, which makes it hard to communicate with them. You might even be feeling confused about whether your young person is really addicted or simply experimenting. You may hesitate to confront them for fear of damaging your relationship.

It is all so new and scary in the beginning. Go with your gut as much as you can. It is okay to screw up and say the wrong thing sometimes. The most important thing is to find ways to stay connected and just be there. Often, we have unwanted conversations with our young person we want to run away from. We may feel resentful that we are in this position, and so the conversation does not necessarily flow easily. With time and practice, it can become easier to communicate and become more natural. It might feel forced in the beginning but with practice that will change.

## UNDERSTANDING AND ACCEPTANCE

The path your young person has taken can be difficult to accept. You might feel ashamed, embarrassed, and/or guilty that they have gone down this road. Speaking with your young person about their substance use makes it feel real, so it can be hard to start the conversation. You do not want to see them that way. You might also be fearful of the stigma it will bring and how it will impact other family members. It may be helpful to find other outlets and support to express these feelings.

With acceptance comes purpose. We must believe in our young person for them to believe in themselves. We cannot change other people; we can only change our approach. This starts by speaking with kindness and respect. Listen, not to respond but to understand. Tell them you love them no matter what, that you have not lost respect for them and that they can come to you about anything. Your young person will notice and appreciate your effort.





When you can't change the situation, no matter how much you wish you could, what is there left to do? When your loved one is using, hurting themselves, and you are left there, wishing, praying, hoping they will stop, what can you do? This is a tough one, and may not be an easy concept to understand, but ACCEPTANCE is key. You don't have to like it, you don't have to understand or agree with it, but once you can accept that you alone cannot change a person's behaviours, it can bring some ease.

Acceptance can relieve stress in knowing that you do not have control, you cannot change the facts. Acceptance allows for a chance to pivot your behaviour. My loved one is using, I am scared for them, I am sad, I am hurt. They do not want to stop using, they can't stop using, they are not ready or willing. This seems unfair, and yes, it can be unfair to have to observe a loved one slipping away into a darkness that no words can describe.

Acceptance is an action word. Once you have accepted that a loved one is using, and that you cannot change it, it allows you to decide what is next. Now what? Acceptance can allow you to choose how you will take care of yourself. Acceptance allows you to meet your loved one where they are at. Instead of wishing, praying and hoping things will change immediately, you can begin to open your mind to new avenues of coping with the stress and worry.

Be there for your loved one and be there for yourself. In order to help your loved one, when they are ready, you need to take care of yourself in the meantime. You will need to have strength when your loved one is ready. Accepting the facts now, will help you in the future. And remember, you are not alone in this. Be gentle on yourself.

– Thunder Bay parent



## WAYS TO STAY CONNECTED WITH YOUR YOUNG PERSON

Find any way you can to connect with your young person, within your boundaries. Every conversation is an opportunity to connect. Tell them you love them, drugs or not, no matter what. Be curious to better understand where they are coming from and withhold judgment to build a better connection with them.

**Remind them of happy memories.** Remind them of things that connect them back to you and your family to let them know you're still here and that they can come back.

**Talk about other things too.** Try to have conversations about things other than their substance use or mental health. Remember that your young person is still a young person with young person needs. Not all their behaviours are a result of their substance use. Their brains are still very much in development.

**Keep inviting them to family things,** even if they do not usually come. It makes them feel like they are still connected to the family and that you still want them there. Let them know you are ready for them to show up however they show up, but ensure it is a safe space for them. Set them up for success.

**Encourage positive hobbies.** If they express interest in something, encourage them to take it on. If you offer all this stuff they said they wanted and it doesn't get used, don't hold it against them. Celebrate the part that did work, that they were interested, and that it will be here later if they want to come back to it.

**Celebrate the small things:** This can look different depending on your situation. Find whatever works best for you and your young person. There are a lot of moments that we can celebrate. They can be as simple as coming home on time, spending time with family, or responding to a text message. Acknowledge and remember those small victories, ‘the gems’, and don’t get stuck on the other times.

**Offer non-verbal affection.** For some young people, they get to a point where they no longer want a hug goodnight anymore. It’s still important to offer that physical connection when you can, even if it’s not reciprocated. For young people on the street, having physical affection that is safe and unconditional is particularly important to remind them of what that is. Everyone expresses love in different ways. You can read [The 5 Love Languages](#) by Gary Chapman and learn more about your young person’s love language. See **Appendix A** for link.

Encourage your young person to connect with people who might help them on their way. This could be with friends, family members, a coach – someone they enjoy spending time with. Take them out for coffee, pay for their lunch. If they are connecting with people, they are widening their system of support.



**Encourage curiosity about spiritual connections your young person may benefit from. Faith-based recovery paths offer reassurances that there is a Higher Power invested in them and to whom they can turn for guidance in working through the guilt, shame and regret they may feel about their substance use. Both western Christian beliefs and Indigenous teachings offer genuine support for anyone ready to ‘let go and let God’ into their lives, or put another way, eager for the forgiving protection of a Creator who loves all living beings.**

**– Thunder Bay parent**

## TALKING WITH YOUR YOUNG PERSON

Our young people who are using substances often do things that may make us feel sad, angry, frustrated and disappointed. Their stories can be heartbreaking, shocking, and scary. They may not want to tell us because they do not want to disappoint us, burden us or face repercussions. It can be helpful to think about your response to hearing this kind of news ahead of time. How can you create a space for them to be able to tell you anything?

**Be welcoming and non-judgmental.** When you have not seen them in days or weeks and they finally show up at your door, do your best to offer a non-judgmental, loving welcome. Try not to comment on their physical appearance. Negative comments could hinder your connection, rather than foster it.



**Avoid:** *"If you are going to act like this, you're not welcome here."*



**Try:** *"I care about you, and I want to make sure we both feel safe and respected. Let's figure out how to move forward together."*

**Choose to listen more and speak less.** Listening is powerful. Saying "thank-you" when they share with you, hugging them as often as you can, and choosing kindness are valuable skills. Creating a safe space within yourself to be able to hold your young person's pain, anger, and emotion is vital.



**Avoid:** *"You need to stop using drugs right now, or else!"*



**Try:** *"I'm here to support you. Let's talk about what you need and how I can help."*



**Understand your own feelings.** Sometimes you are able to listen, to hold it together, and say all of the right things, and then you need to go and fall apart. That is okay. If it feels like too much you can also hold off on having this conversation and reach out for support (see **Chapter 6** – Support for Yourself). Give yourself a break when you need it. Give them the same opportunity. It is hard as a parent, not being able to fix everything. Accepting that you cannot always help is humbling and it can be hard to accept the reality of how you are feeling.

**Hold space for them.** “What people need is a good listening to”. Have conversations about observed behaviour and use I feel statements. When you speak from what you see and what you feel, your young person cannot dispute it as easily as if you are saying “You’re this and you’re that”. Be as authentic as you can. Speak from the heart. And really speak to them the way you want to be spoken to.

Be honest with them and try your best to focus less on how their behaviour impacts you. Maybe they don’t care, or it hurts them because of the shame that they feel, so it is not a helpful conversation. It is hard to switch your brain from protecting your young person to providing space for them to make their own choices. Try to acknowledge how it is impacting them and how difficult and uncomfortable it might be for them to talk to you about these things. Encourage them to get support (see **Appendix A** for resources).



**Avoid:** “Why are you lying to me? I can’t trust you anymore.”



**Try:** “I’ve noticed you’ve been distant, and I just want to make sure you’re okay. I’m here when you’re ready to talk.”

**Use open ended questions.** Open-ended questions can help reframe a judgment into curiosity. A closed-ended question such as, "Could you call your counsellor?" can be received as an unwanted suggestion. Rather, reframing the question to, "What are your options at the moment?" may be received more as an invitation. Depending on the circumstances in that moment, it could be helpful to remind your young person that they are resilient, resourceful, and have choices. Engage them in problem solving, rather than telling them what to do.

**Recognize and acknowledge your own learning process.** Admit that you are going to make mistakes along the way. Sometimes you might catch yourself and realize that you don't know why you're saying what you're saying, or that it might not be helping. Do not be afraid to stop midtrack, tell them you are sorry and change the track. Be honest. Let them know specifically what you are really worried about and that you are not trying to upset or control them.



**What keeps us connected.**

**What you see is someone who won't stop chasing drugs.  
What you don't see is a person haunted by trauma  
that consumes.**

**Drugged relief, he said, gave him leave to step outside the  
dark shadows.**

**He wanted another way, to shine in the light, to be  
connected to good.**

**We navigated his difficult path, sometimes far apart,  
sometimes together.**

**Trail hikes, dog walks, bicycling, camping, stargazing,  
connected in nature.**

**Street drugs took his unfinished life from us but won't take  
our memories.**

He remains vibrant and shining in the starry nights  
we shared.

The link between us assured by this connection to the  
natural world.

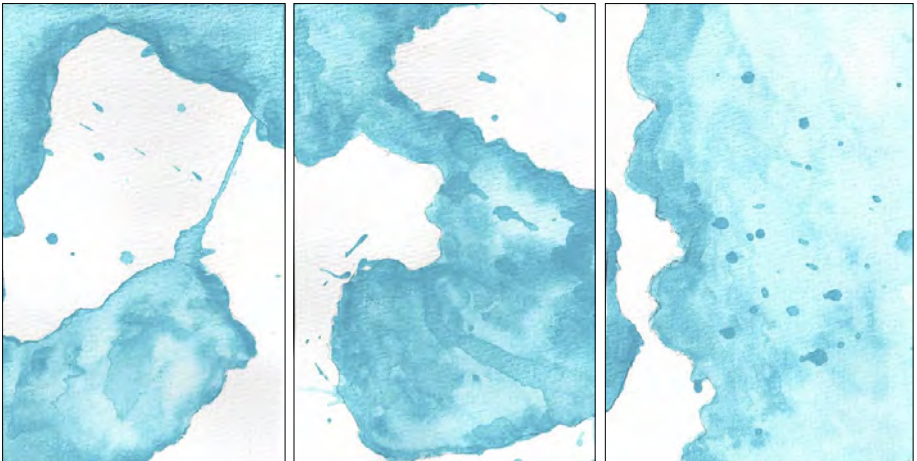
An invaluable lesson in creating a never-to-be-broken  
connection.

As parents and caregivers, make time to experience nature  
together.

With someone who needs your presence.


– Thunder Bay parent

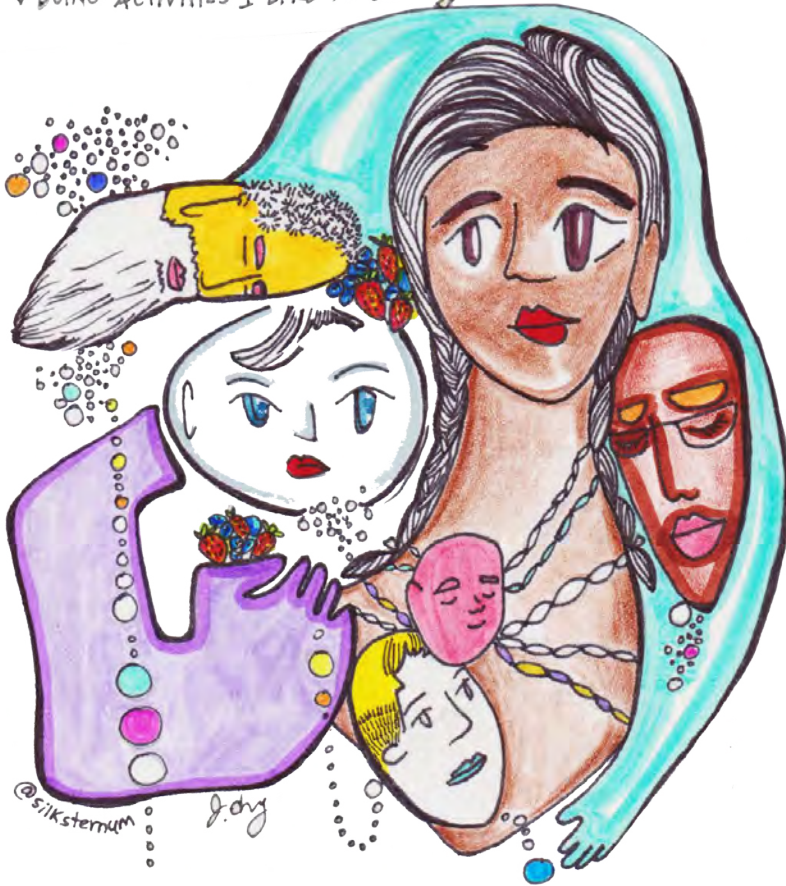
At the end of the day, you could be doing everything you feel is right and still not see any improvement. But you need to stay the course. Manage your expectations until they have decided they want to get help. It is hard to have a serious conversation with your young person until they choose to get help for themselves.



*Lost and found in the clouds – Thunder Bay parent*  
*Art activity facilitated by Ma-Nee Chacaby with support from Céline Mundinger*

# Adults & caregivers can support me by...

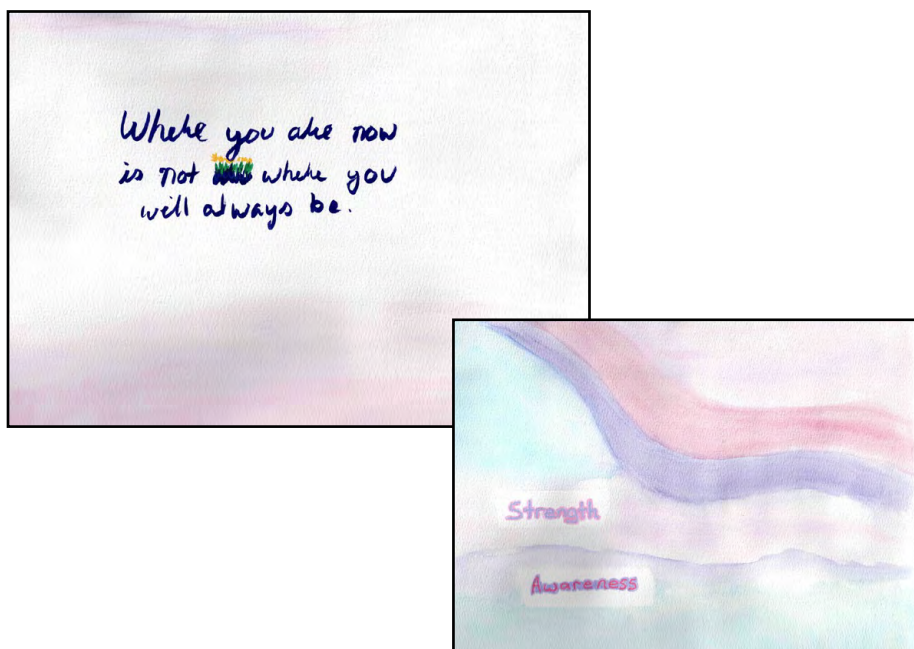
- ★ CHECKING IN WITH ME ★ NOT GIVING UP ON ME ★
- ★ LETTING ME JUST FEEL MY FEELINGS ★  ★
- ★ OFFERING EMPATHY & OPENNESS ★ SAYING I LOVE YOU ★
- ★ LISTENING WITHOUT JUDGEMENT ★ MEETING ME WHERE I AM ★
- ★ DOING ACTIVITIES I LIKE TO DO ★



## CHAPTER 8

# Youth Voices

As parents, we have our own experiences, but hearing directly from youth about what support actually helped — or what was missing — makes this resource stronger. Their insights help bridge the gap between what caregivers think is helpful and what youth actually need. By including their voices, we're making space for real, honest conversations that can lead to better support for young people struggling with substance use.



Youth Voices art activity facilitated by Ardelle Sagutcheway and Caroline Kajorinne of Mindful Makers Collective.







Youth Voices art activity facilitated by Ardelle Sagutcheway and Caroline Kajorinne of Mindful Makers Collective.



## The Support that Got Us Through It

Shared by Youth in Thunder Bay



## A Young Person's Perspective

In Thunder Bay, three sessions brought together youth with lived experience of substance use to share their perspectives through guided prompts, storytelling, and art. To bring some of these stories to life, we collaborated with artist Jayal Chung to illustrate them into comics, ensuring youth voices were represented in a creative and meaningful way. The artwork takes us from youth experiences with substance use, insights into relationships with adults in their life, to recovery and healing.

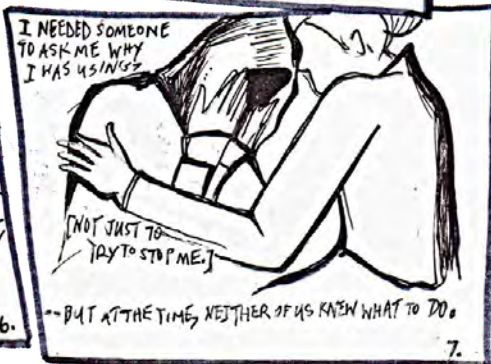
**Jayal Chung** is a self-taught artist, parent & youth worker born and raised in Thunder Bay. She is passionate about community building & involved in different art collectives focused on projects and activism that talk back to colonialism and sexual violence.





MY MOM TRIED TO STOP ME. 3. THE ONLY WAY SHE KNEW HOW— BY GROUNDING ME, TAKING MY PHONE, AND TRYING TO PUNISH ME INTO MAKING BETTER CHOICES.

BUT **ADDICTION** DOESN'T WORK LIKE THAT. INSTEAD OF KEEPING ME HOME IT PUSHED ME FURTHER AWAY.





# I wish adults & care givers knew...





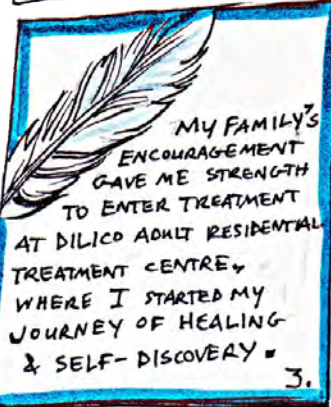
CROSSROADS IS A SOBER LIVING POST-TREATMENT FACILITY WHERE I LEARNED TO BE MYSELF, BE VULNERABLE AND HAVE...







AFTER BEING RELEASED FROM JAIL, I MADE THE LIFE-CHANGING DECISION TO COME HOME TO MY FAMILY, WHERE I WAS MET WITH LOVE & SUPPORT FROM EVERY ONE. 2.



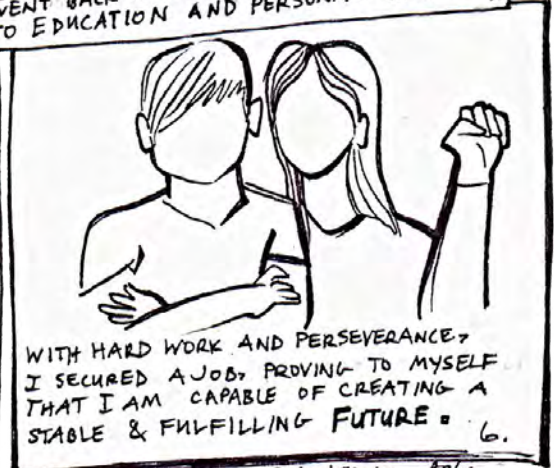
MY FAMILY'S ENCOURAGEMENT GAVE ME STRENGTH TO ENTER TREATMENT AT DILICO ADULT RESIDENTIAL TREATMENT CENTRE, WHERE I STARTED MY JOURNEY OF HEALING & SELF-DISCOVERY. 3.



DETERMINED TO REBUILD MY LIFE, I MOVED INTO A SOBER LIVING HOUSE & WENT BACK TO SCHOOL COMMITTING MYSELF TO EDUCATION AND PERSONAL GROWTH. 4.



I FOUND A STRONG SUPPORT SYSTEM IN RECOVERY BY ATTENDING NA MEETINGS, HEALING CIRCLES, AFTERCARE PROGRAMS, AND COUNSELLING, ALL WHICH HELPED ME STAY GROUNDED & FOCUSED. 5.



WITH HARD WORK AND PERSEVERANCE, I SECURED A JOB, PROVING TO MYSELF THAT I AM CAPABLE OF CREATING A STABLE & FULFILLING FUTURE. 6.

@silksternum joly





## CHAPTER 9

# Family Relationships

When a young person is experiencing challenges with substance use, it affects the people that care about them. Family relationships can be impacted in different ways. As a parent, you may find yourself at the centre of navigating these relationships which can be, in itself, another role to play. If you are a single parent, it can feel like you are completely alone. Regardless of what family means for you, support for yourself is crucial.

### RELATIONSHIP WITH PARTNER/CO-PARENT

Whether you are a single parent or living with the parent of your young person, you can face many challenges co-parenting. You all have the responsibility to love and guide your young person and you all, in your own way, carry the worry about what is happening.

In a co-parenting situation, you may have different fundamental approaches to parenting and to substance use, and you may not be on the same page with respect to the best approach to support your young person. Different approaches can send mixed messages and complicate communication. If there are disagreements between parenting styles, work on them without the youth present, come together in a united front, and always have love at the centre of all decisions.

Having a new partner can also pose challenges in the home. If you live together, a common struggle is that your partner may not have control over what happens or what choices are made but must live

with the consequences of those decisions. They might feel that they did not sign up for being a parent of a young person dependent on substances. Try to focus on the youth, not just the behaviour, because substances can change who they are and how they act. What caregivers are struggling with is the impact of the substances, not the child themselves.

Sometimes it just gets difficult to agree on how best to parent a young person with substance use challenges. You may need to practice harm reduction for yourself and for your partner. One option is for one parent to stay with the young person who is struggling, while the other parent takes a break.

Parenting is not a 50/50 division of responsibilities and it is important to use each person's strengths to help take care of everyone in the household. It might not be their strength to set the boundaries, but they might have other strengths to draw on in other situations. Use your parenting strengths as best you can. Recognize and work with each other's strengths.

## RELATIONSHIPS WITH SIBLINGS

Addiction impacts everyone in the family. Although we cannot control the outcome, we can control our own actions, which includes how we interact with one another. You might be concerned about how your other kids are coping. Siblings can be deeply affected, feeling everything from worry about their sibling's safety to frustration about the attention the family gives them. Connecting the siblings with support — like a counselor or group — can give them healthy ways to cope.



Some common challenges parents and caregivers face with their other children include:

- parenting the other children differently than the one who uses substances
- having difficulties answering to other siblings who may feel it is unfair that they have less freedom or may question your approach to parenting
- trying to protect your other children, both physically and emotionally
- not knowing how much to share with them or what is age appropriate.

### How much do I share with my other children?

It's a balance. If you leave other siblings out of it, they may have anxiety because they have no say and do not know what is going on. If you include them, they may feel overwhelmed and anxious. It may be helpful to discuss this with another adult, a parent support group, or professional before you decide what to share. If you do not have a partner for support, you may share things with your other children that you would have normally shared with a partner. Ensure you take care of yourself and speak to someone so that you can express your feelings whether it is with trusted friends and family, a counsellor, or peers to avoid oversharing your concerns with your other kids.



## RELATIONSHIPS WITH FRIENDS AND EXTENDED FAMILY

Parenting a young person experiencing challenges with a substance use can feel isolating. It may feel like you are failing as a parent. There is a lot of stigma that comes with substance use. Many parents experience painful events such as having your young person suspended from school, ostracized by their peers and other parents, or being excluded from family events.

It can be challenging to discuss substance use and its effects with extended family and friends who have not had the same experiences. Often friends will talk about the challenges they are having with their kids, and they pale in comparison to what you are going through. Extended family may offer advice or tell you what you should be doing.

Be cautious of how much you share with those who do not have experience with substance use. This is why parent support groups, family support, and counsellors are helpful. Find people who understand what you are going through. It may also be helpful to tell your extended family members and friends what type of support helps you most, whether it is a listening ear, brainstorming ideas or time for respite.



“

As someone who has lived in active addiction and someone who has walked alongside supporting individuals and families impacted by it, I understand the profound challenges and heartaches that come with loving and supporting someone through their struggles. Addiction affects not just the individual but also their families and relationships, testing the limits of love, patience, and hope.

I encourage you to acknowledge your feelings of frustration, disappointment, and even resentment toward your loved one living with addiction — these feelings often arise because the person struggling with addiction is hurting someone you love deeply. It's okay to feel this way. These emotions are valid and a reflection of your deep care and concern.

What's important is to allow yourself the space to process these feelings and to seek healing for yourself. You cannot pour love from an empty cup. Caring for your own emotional wellbeing is not only essential for you but also for the person you are supporting. Prioritizing your own healing helps you show up with strength and compassion, creating a foundation for both you and your loved one to grow.

– Thunder Bay parent

”



Youth Voices collage activity facilitated by Céline Mundinger of CreAction Collective.

## APPENDIX A

# Caregiver Supports

### **If you or someone you know is experiencing a mental health crisis:**

- Call 911 or visit your nearest emergency department
- Crisis Response Thunder Bay: 807-346-8282 (call or text)  
District/Toll Free: 1-866-888-8988
- Suicide Crisis helpline: 988 (call or text)
- Hope for Wellness Helpline – 1-855-242-3310 or chat at [www.hopeforwellness.ca](http://www.hopeforwellness.ca) (available 24/7 to all Indigenous people across Canada)
- Talk4Healing 1-855-554-HEAL (call or text)  
(confidential helpline for Indigenous women)

### LINKS TO SERVICES

#### **For Help Finding Access to Substance Use and Mental Health Services:**

- Thunder Bay District Health Unit  
[www.tbdhu.com/mentalhealthsupport](http://www.tbdhu.com/mentalhealthsupport)
- U-turn (for youth aged 12-24)  
<https://uturntbay.ca/>
- Access Point Northwest  
(807) 624-3400 or <https://accesspointnorthwest.ca>
- NAN HOPE  
Phone: 1-844-626-4673 or Text: 705-702-HOPE  
(culturally appropriate support for Indigenous Peoples in the Nishnawbe Aski Nation.)

- National Native Alcohol and Drug Abuse Program  
(807) 630-8134 or [www.beendigen.com/programs/nnadap/](http://www.beendigen.com/programs/nnadap/)
- Call 211 or visit <https://211north.ca/>
- ConnexOntario  
1-866-531-2600 or visit [www.connexontario.ca/](http://www.connexontario.ca/)

### **Harm Reduction Supplies and Naloxone:**

- Thunder Bay: Superior Points Harm Reduction Program  
(807) 621-7861 or (807) 621-7862
- Thunder Bay District: call your nearest branch office  
[www.tbdhu.com/contact](http://www.tbdhu.com/contact)
- Pharmacies: [www.ontario.ca/page/where-get-free-naloxone-kit](http://www.ontario.ca/page/where-get-free-naloxone-kit)
- Supplies and needle disposal: <https://ohrdp.ca/find-supplies/>

### **Legal Supports:**

- Kinna-aweya Legal Clinic  
1 (888) 373-3309 | [www.kalc.ca/](http://www.kalc.ca/)
- Legal Aid Ontario  
1 (800) 668-8258 | [www.legalaid.on.ca/](http://www.legalaid.on.ca/)
- Law Society Referral Service  
1 (855) 947-5255 | <https://lsrs.lso.ca/lsrs/welcome>
- Nishnawbe-Aski Legal Services Corporation  
1 (800) 465-5581 | <https://nanlegal.on.ca/>



# Caregiver Resources

**Disclaimer:** please note that these recommendations are provided by caregivers and do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the Thunder Bay District Health Unit (TBDHU).

**Content warning:** the apps, books, support groups, podcasts, videos, and websites may contain content that could be distressing for those with lived experience or those supporting others who use substances. Please prioritize your well-being and seek support if needed.

## Apps

- Connect by Lifeguard App: A free app that provides quick access to resources, local drug alerts, and a use alone timer that connects emergency responders to people who are using drugs alone.  
<https://lifeguarddh.com>
- Thunderbird Wellness App: A free app that provides culturally grounded mental health and wellness support for First Nations, providing resources, tools, and guidance for healing.  
<https://thunderbirdpf.org/thunderbird-wellness-app/>

## Books

- Beyond Addiction: How Science and Kindness Help People Change – Jeffrey Foote, Carrie Wilkens, Nicole Kosanke, and Stephanie Higgs
- From the Ashes: My Story of Being Métis, Homeless, and Finding My Way – Jesse Thistle



- In the Realm of Hungry Ghosts - Close Encounters with Addictions – Gabor Maté
- Living in the Wake of Addiction – Lessons for Courageous Caregiving – Gloria Englund
- The Journey of the Heroic Parent – Brad M. Reedy
- The Language of Letting Go – Melody Beattie
- A Two-Spirit Journey: The Autobiography of a Lesbian Ojibwa-Cree Elder – Ma-Nee Chacaby
- The Hollow Tree: Fighting Addiction with Traditional Native Healing - Herb Nabigon

## **Support Groups**

- Al-Anon and Alateen  
<https://al-anon.org/al-anon-meetings/>
- All People All Pathways Peer Support  
<https://capsa.ca/peer-support/>
- Families for Addiction Recovery  
[www.farcanada.org/family-support/we-can-help/parent-support-group/](http://www.farcanada.org/family-support/we-can-help/parent-support-group/)
- Holding Hope Canada by Moms Stop the Harm  
[www.holdinghopecanada.org/](http://www.holdinghopecanada.org/)
- Nar-Anon  
[www.nar-anon.org/find-a-meeting](http://www.nar-anon.org/find-a-meeting)



## Podcasts

- A Sobering Podcast (Thunder Bay documentary)  
[www.asoberingpodcast.com/](http://www.asoberingpodcast.com/)
- My Child & Addiction Parent-to-Parent Podcast Series  
[www.caron.org/parent-podcast-series](http://www.caron.org/parent-podcast-series)
- Kelty's Mental Health Resource Centre Podcast  
<https://keltymentalhealth.ca/podcast>

## Videos

- Everything you think you know about addiction is wrong – TED Talk with Johann Hari  
[www.ted.com/talks/johann\\_hari\\_everything\\_you\\_think\\_you\\_know\\_about\\_addiction\\_is\\_wrong](http://www.ted.com/talks/johann_hari_everything_you_think_you_know_about_addiction_is_wrong)
- The Power of Addiction and The Addiction of Power: TED Talk with Gabor Maté  
[www.youtube.com/watch?v=66cYcSak6nE](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=66cYcSak6nE)

## Websites

- Alcohol and Drug Foundation – Drug Wheel  
<https://adf.org.au/insights/drug-wheel/>
- CAMH Information for Families  
[www.camh.ca/families](http://www.camh.ca/families)
- CAMH When a Family Member is Unwilling to Seek Help  
[www.camh.ca/en/health-info/guides-and-publications/when-a-family-member-is-unwilling-to-seek-help](http://www.camh.ca/en/health-info/guides-and-publications/when-a-family-member-is-unwilling-to-seek-help)



- From Grief to Action Coping Kit: Dealing with Addiction in Your Family  
[www.heretohelp.bc.ca/sites/default/files/fgta-coping-kit.pdf](http://www.heretohelp.bc.ca/sites/default/files/fgta-coping-kit.pdf)
- Good Samaritan Drug Overdose Act  
<https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/opioids/about-good-samaritan-drug-overdose-act.html>
- Mental Health Caregiver Guide – Ottawa Public Health  
[https://www.ottawapublichealth.ca/en/public-health-topics/resources/Documents/mental\\_health\\_caregiver\\_guide\\_en.pdf](https://www.ottawapublichealth.ca/en/public-health-topics/resources/Documents/mental_health_caregiver_guide_en.pdf)
- Moms Stop the Harm  
[www.momsstoptheharm.com/](http://www.momsstoptheharm.com/)
- Ontario Caregiver  
<https://ontariocaregiver.ca/health/mental-illness/>
- Ontario Caregiver FAQ on Privacy and Consent for Caregivers  
<https://ontariocaregiver.ca/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/FAQson-Privacy-and-Consent-for-Caregivers-Supporting-Someone-in-the-Mental-Health-and-Addiction-System-Aug4-1.pdf>
- Overcoming Stigma Through: Language: A Primer – CCSA & CAPSA  
[www.ccsa.ca/sites/default/files/2019-09/CCSA-Language-and-Stigma-in-Substance-Use-Addiction-Guide-2019-en.pdf](http://www.ccsa.ca/sites/default/files/2019-09/CCSA-Language-and-Stigma-in-Substance-Use-Addiction-Guide-2019-en.pdf)
- Talking Pot with Youth: A Cannabis Communication Guide for Youth Allies – CCSA  
[www.ccsa.ca/sites/default/files/2020-04/CCSA-Cannabis-Communication-Guide-2020-en.pdf](http://www.ccsa.ca/sites/default/files/2020-04/CCSA-Cannabis-Communication-Guide-2020-en.pdf)
- The 5 Love Languages by Gary Chapman  
<https://5lovelanguages.com/>
- Thunder Bay District Health Unit  
[www.tbdhu.com/stopstigma](http://www.tbdhu.com/stopstigma)
- Thunderbird Partnership Foundation  
<https://thunderbirdpf.org/harm-reduction/>



YOUR SUPPORT SYSTEM

This section provides space to include your list of supports, as well as your young person’s supports to help you keep track of things.

YOUR SUPPORTS

Resource (organization, program, individual offering support)	Name & Contact Info

## YOUR YOUNG PERSON'S SUPPORTS

[illegible]



Youth Voices Collective Poem facilitated by Ardelle Sagutcheway and Caroline Kajorinne of Mindful Makers Collective

This resource can also be accessed digitally.



[www.TBDHU.com/ParentsLikeUs](http://www.TBDHU.com/ParentsLikeUs)

Has this handbook been helpful to you?  
If you have any feedback, we'd love to hear from you.  
The QR code above will take you to a short survey.

**Project Contact:**

**Thunder Bay District Health Unit  
Substance Use Health Program**

**807-625-5900**

[www.TBDHU.com/contact](http://www.TBDHU.com/contact)