



**Brisbane**  
PRIVATE HOSPITAL

**Damascus Health Services**

# Family Information

Providing a confidential and flexible approach to the care and treatment of people with alcohol and prescription drug dependency



# Substance Dependence

Alcohol, benzodiazepines and opiates are often used to assist in coping with problems such as interpersonal conflict and social anxiety. They may also be used as an emotional “anaesthetic” when painful feelings and situations seem overwhelming.

Groups in Damascus Health Services are based on a “coping and social skills training” approach, where patients are taught strategies to more effectively manage their life and its challenges.

Examples of coping skills included in the Damascus Health Services program are:

- Communication skills
- Dealing with conflict
- Skills for managing unhelpful thoughts
- Skills for managing distressing emotions
- Learning to say “no”
- Coping with urges and cravings
- Learning stress management techniques and relaxation
- Relapse prevention strategies
- Understanding the nature and scope of addiction

It is important, when trying to understand the nature of substance dependence, that the person with the problem is not seen as being “weak”.

Rather substance dependence is caused by a complex interaction between individual and social factors.

The nature of substance dependence is such that roles within the family may change to accommodate the problem. There may be a change in responsibilities or decision making, or control of finances and sometimes such change becomes firmly entrenched. A barrier to recovery may be that families are not prepared to make further change in response to abstinence. An example of this was a comment from someone who had remained abstinent for three months, when she asked the question “How long do you have to be sober, before your opinions count again?”

*"Once dependence on substances has developed, it takes on a life of its own, rather like a "disease". It can be extraordinarily difficult for people who are dependent on substances to cease using them, although many of the factors which may have contributed to their use in the past may now have been resolved."*

# Feedback

A significant part of the patient's understanding of their substance dependence involves them recognising both the triggers to their substance use and the consequences of use. It is also relevant for them to be aware of how it affects those around them, particularly their family or significant others.

It is important that family members or significant others share with patients the effects of substance misuse on them. At the same time, they should be prepared to listen to how some of their behaviours may impact on patients. This two-way communication is important to clear the air and move forward with a greater mutual understanding.

A family member may become aware that some of his/her behaviour is contributing to stress and may be able to modify this behaviour with beneficial effects. Similarly, patients need to know the full impact of their substance use and so might have a more detailed understanding of why it is important to stop misuse.

**Remember:** *Neither of you can read minds!*



## Trust

Trust can be broken by deceit, manipulation and unkept promises and needs to be rebuilt. Such dishonesty is often like a 'survival skill' used by dependent people to maintain their substance use. For example, a pethidine dependent person may become good at 'conning' a doctor into believing he or she has symptoms in order to get medication. This dishonesty (when directed at you) is not necessarily a personal affront to you: it can be part of the nature of the dependence.

However, dishonesty is inappropriate and needs to change. This 'lack of integrity' can be the motivator in seeking treatment for some people who find it difficult to live with their own dishonest behaviour.

To rebuild trust, the person must begin to be 'trustworthy' but they also need a little trust returned and time to re-establish confidence. Trusting again can be difficult when the past is so full of heartache, but is necessary in order to successfully rebuild relationships.

## Support

Everyone has different needs. There is no one 'right' way to support people with alcohol or drug problems. Support could involve changing family routines (going for a walk together in the evenings instead of sharing a drink together), better communication, being prepared not to drink in front of them or being prepared to miss that party if they are feeling vulnerable.

Support can be in the shape of giving back responsibilities. This can be difficult when a family have become used to a certain way of operating to cope with substance use. However, it may be necessary for the person to feel 'needed' again. Alternatively, other family members may take on extra responsibilities to help reduce stress in the person, who may be feeling overloaded with responsibilities.

Family members need to review the sort of support they need from each other – discuss this.

## Encouragement

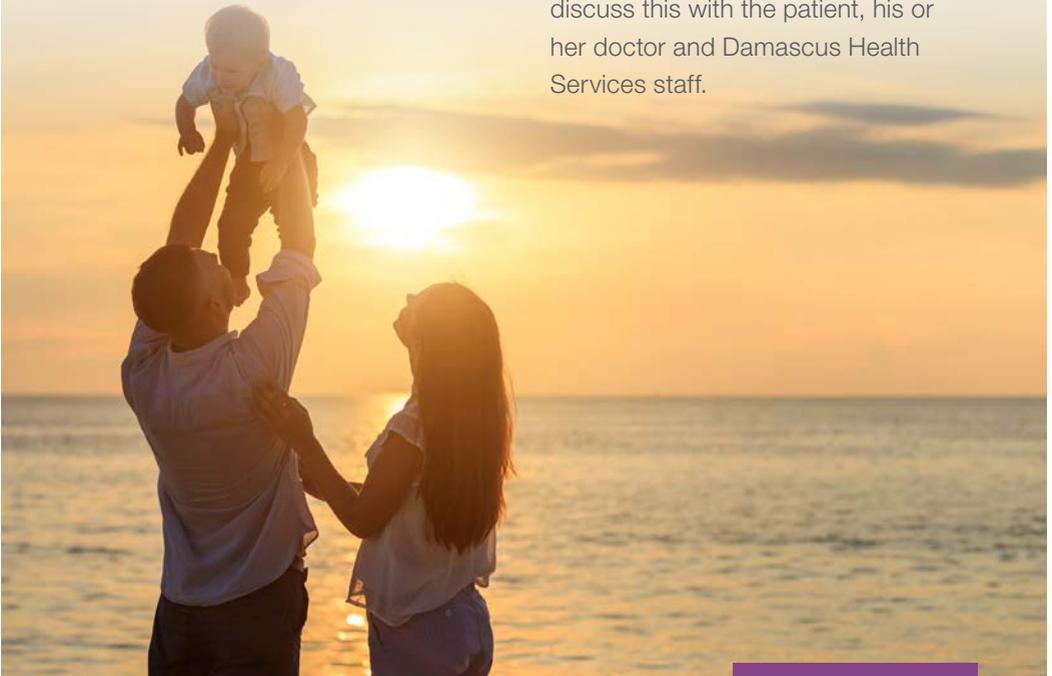
Self-belief is important in order to make the lifestyle changes necessary to achieve long-term abstinence. Mutual recognition of strengths and abilities is an important component in building self-esteem.

It's common for people with substance dependence to be unsure of their capacity to make changes. Future optimism, in the form of encouragement expressed by significant others, can build confidence and this is imperative for success.

## Understanding

In any long-term plan for abstinence a number of changes are proposed and need to be implemented. Some of these changes may impact on significant others and may even feel uncomfortable to the patient. Examples may include saying “no” to some invitations or requests, being more assertive with others (perhaps even with family) and attending follow-up sessions at Damascus Health Services or Alcoholics Anonymous (AA). Patience and understanding that these changes are part of an approach to stop substance misuse will support change.

If these changes cause difficulties over an extended period of time, discuss this with the patient, his or her doctor and Damascus Health Services staff.



## Emotions

Learning how to express and manage emotions is an important facet of the program. A number of patients use a substance to anaesthetise emotions they have not wanted to feel. Part of the recovery process is to “feel those feelings” again. Significant others may find that frustration or anxiety (that in the past may have been associated with substance use) are expressed whilst an individual is abstinent. Patients need to experiment and practice expressing these feelings. Although it would be understandable to believe that these feelings might lead to relapse or are even a sign of relapse, this is not necessarily the case. It is unrealistic to expect that when patients leave Damascus Health Service, they will only experience positive feelings. Like you, they will feel a whole range of emotions. Significant others are encouraged to be patient with these new behaviours and participate in developing a new way of communicating and understanding each other.

## Relapse

In learning any new behaviour, relapse to old practices is not uncommon. Dieters and smokers will attest to this. Before discharge, Damascus Health Services patients develop a relapse prevention plan that includes a comprehensive structured programme for a daily and weekly routine, that strengthens the persons’ ability to grow in abstinence and to identify triggers for use and high risk situations.

A relapse is not necessarily disastrous. It is important to learn from it and incorporate this new information into a revised action plan, so that the likelihood of success is greater.

Family and friends are encouraged to discuss relapse and develop a plan of action should it occur. Relapse is not inevitable and although painful, it should be seen as a learning experience, not a failure.

## Follow Up

In general, those who participate in follow up programs with Damascus Health Services or their doctor, or a self-help group etc, do significantly better than those who don't. Follow up provides an opportunity to discuss coping strategies whilst people are

living their usual lives. It is relatively easy to stay alcohol and drug free in Damascus Health Services. It is after patients return to their own environment that they are truly tested and perhaps need the greatest amount of support.



# Support For The Family

Support for you and other family members is important, both to care for yourself and to provide the best possible assistance for your partner or significant other. Here are some places to start:

## **Damascus Health Services:**

- Individual counselling sessions are limited, however it is possible for the patient to organise this or a joint session with their doctor, allied health professional or nurse.
- A 24 hour telephone support service is available for you. However, due to our confidentiality constraints, no information will be given to you about the patient. That doesn't mean you won't be given some useful advice in general terms.
- Participation in the Damascus Health Services "Couples Group" is also an option that your partner can arrange for you both.
- Participation in the Damascus Health Service "Family and Significant Other Group" is encouraged (these groups are held every two weeks).

## **Self Help Facilities:**

### **Alcoholics Anonymous (AA)**

Phone: 1300 222 222

[www.aa.org.au](http://www.aa.org.au)

### **Al-Anon and Alateen**

Phone: 1300 252 666

[www.al-anon.alateen.org/australia](http://www.al-anon.alateen.org/australia)

### **A.C.O.A. (Adult Children of Alcoholics)**

Phone: 0403 819 579

[www.adultchildren.org](http://www.adultchildren.org)

### **Lives Lived Well and Breakthrough for Families**

Phone: 1300 727 957

[www.liveslivedwell.org.au](http://www.liveslivedwell.org.au)

### **Family Drug Support (F.D.S.)**

Phone: 1300 368 186

[www.fds.org.au](http://www.fds.org.au)

### **Alcohol & Other Drug Services QLD**

Phone: 1800 177 833

[www.health.qld.gov.au](http://www.health.qld.gov.au)

# Our Advice Through Experience

- Controlled drinking is not a sensible goal once people have developed a severe dependence on alcohol.
- Where possible, in the early stages of abstinence (e.g. up to 6 months) have an alcohol/drug free house – that way people have ‘time’ to use their coping skills to maintain their abstinence and might avoid relapse.

*“There is no cure for substance dependence, only learning how to manage it successfully”*

Many people do manage their substance dependence successfully and maintain abstinence long term. With the support and understanding of their families and significant others, there is always hope and it is totally realistic and appropriate to be optimistic about your family member's future.



## Do's

**Do** be “real” with them. Be honest and up-front in what you say and do, but treat them with compassion and understanding.

**Do** give them feedback about how their substance use has affected you.

**Do** ask what support they need from you – where do I fit into the management plan/support network?

**Do** ask how your drinking might affect them and develop a plan accordingly.

**Do** keep communication lines open so they feel comfortable to tell you how they are going (even if they are struggling).

**Do** look past their substance use to their mood/attitude to determine how they are going (they may be abstinent yet still having a difficult time and needing support).

**Do** make a distinction between necessary medication (e.g. anti-depressants) and substances of abuse.

**Do** encourage follow-up at Damascus Health Services and / or elsewhere.

**Do** discuss a relapse action plan.

## Don't

**Don't** treat them with “kid gloves” – they have to learn to cope in their reality.

**Don't** keep repeating this if you have been heard – TURN THE PAGE

**Don't** become a detective or use guess work – monitor their progress in an open, low key way.

**Don't** presume it won't bother them if you drink in front of them.

**Don't** respond negatively if they do tell you they are struggling. It might stop their honesty next time.

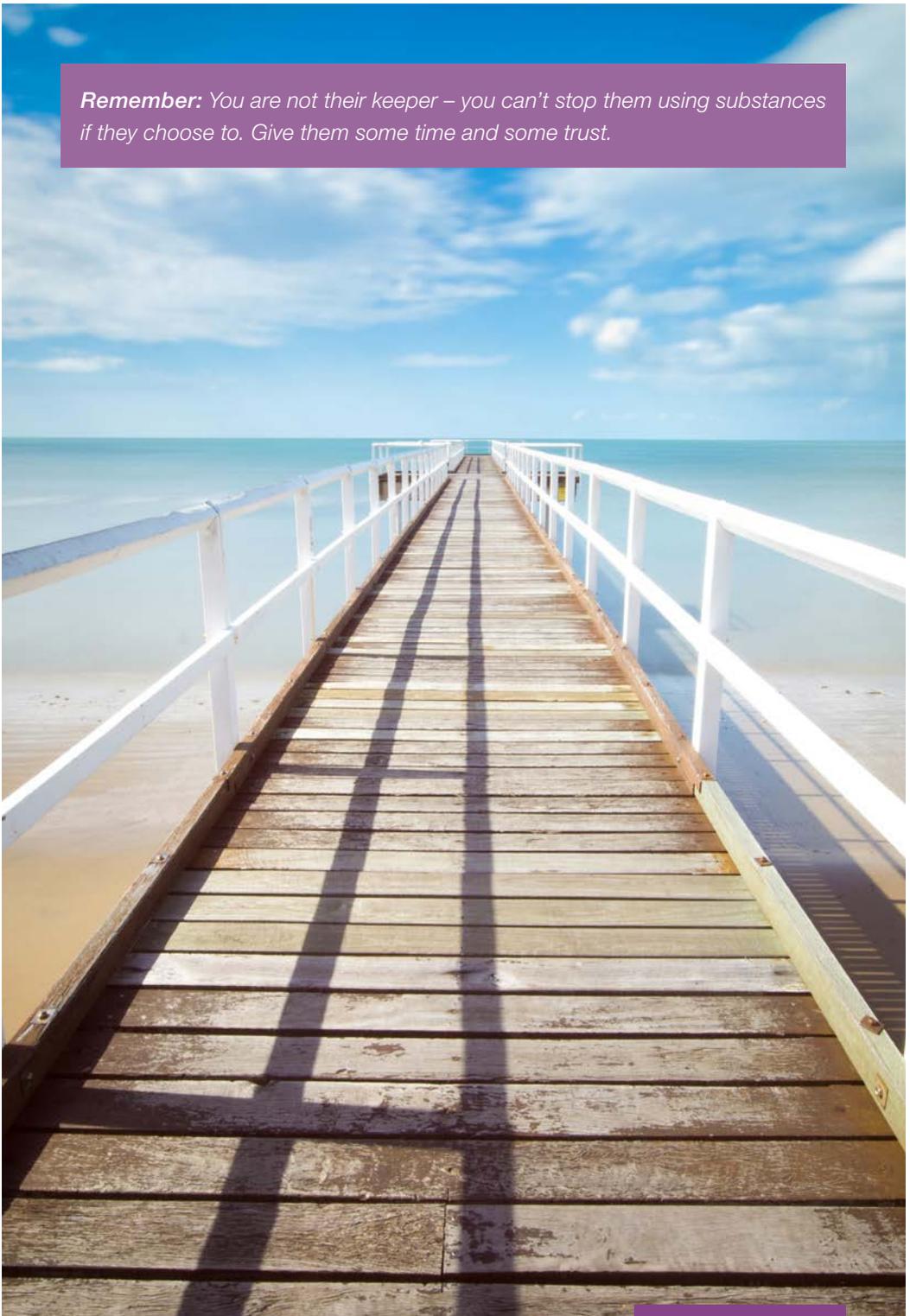
**Don't** judge their progress on their substance abstinence only – there's a lot more to it.

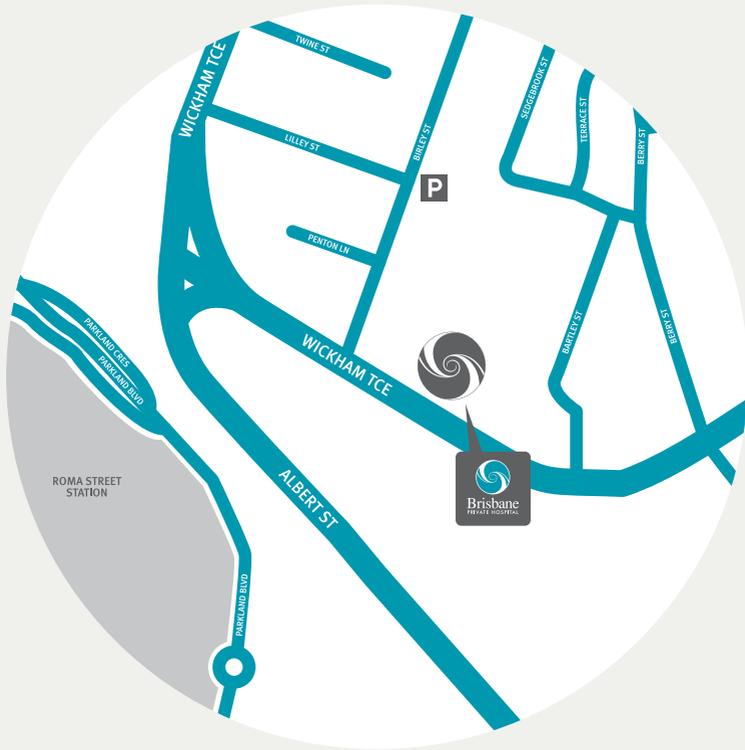
**Don't** view all drugs in same light, some may be necessary for their recovery.

**Don't** see Damascus Health Services Day Patient Follow – Up as a sign of slipping.

**Don't** just wait and hope it won't happen – it might.

**Remember:** *You are not their keeper – you can't stop them using substances if they choose to. Give them some time and some trust.*





**Brisbane**  
PRIVATE HOSPITAL

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