I Feel Like I'm Losing My Child!

There are still ways to protect the relationship.

Imagine struggling with something you know may need to change (e.g., your weight, exercise, a relationship), while feeling that it has become the main thing the people you love want to talk about. Would you sometimes avoid them simply because you do not want another reminder of a problem you already feel worried, ashamed, or unsure about?

Substance use can be so consuming that parents feel as though the child they knew has disappeared. Conversations become about using, treatment, money, broken agreements, or what needs to change. Ordinary moments together can become harder to find.

Your child may also begin to experience the relationship differently. If most interactions involve questions, worry, advice, anger or conflict, pulling away may feel easier than staying connected. That does not necessarily mean they no longer care about you.

Staying connected does not mean pretending everything is fine. It means continuing to see and respond to the whole person—not only the substance use. Noticing what they are doing right (even small things) will increase connection, keep the door open and support change.

A meal, a shared joke, a ride somewhere, or a conversation that has nothing to do with substances can help preserve the relationship. You may not be able to bring back exactly what the relationship used to be, but you can keep creating opportunities for connection now.

Situation

Your child seems more distant than they used to be. They spend less time with the family, avoid conversations, or seem irritated when you try to connect. Substance use may have changed their routines, relationships, or behavior. You miss the person you remember and worry that you are losing your relationship with them. You don't see them often and one evening you have an opportunity to talk. You want them to know how much you care, but your fear and sadness quickly come out as questions, pressure, and criticism.

Instead of

You: "I don't even know who you are anymore. You never talk to us, and all you care about is getting high."

Child: "Here we go again."

You: "I'm serious. You used to care about this family. Now you barely spend any time with us."

Child: "Maybe because every time I'm around you, you start in on me."

You: "What am I supposed to do? Just pretend everything is fine while I watch you ruin your life?"

Child: "You don't know anything about my life."

You: "I'm your parent. I know you better than anyone. I just want my child back."

Child: "Then stop trying to change me."

You: "I'm trying to save you!"

Child: "Just leave me alone."

In this version, your words come from love and fear. But your child may hear criticism, disappointment, or the message that you no longer see anything about them except their substance use. They may pull away even more, leaving both of you feeling disconnected.

Try this

You: "I've been thinking about you a lot lately. I miss spending time with you."
Child: "You can find me."
You: "I know. I guess what I mean is that things feel different between us, and I miss feeling close to you."
Child: "You just want to talk about my using again."
You: "I am worried about your substance use, and I'm not going to pretend I'm not. But that isn't the only thing I see when I look at you."
Child: "Well it sure seems like it is."
You: "Yeah, I can see your point if all our conversations are about your substance use. I don't want every conversation between us to be about what's wrong."
Child: "Okay."
You: "I'd like to find some ways for us to spend time together without turning everything into a serious conversation. Maybe we could make the tacos you like or go shopping for clothes."
Child: "Maybe."
You: "Okay, I'd like that. I just want you to know that I love you, and I want to spend time with you."

In this version, you are not ignoring the substance use or pretending that everything is okay. You are making room for the relationship alongside the problem. Small moments of warmth, interest, and ordinary connection can remind your child that they are more than their substance use. Staying connected does not guarantee change, but it can help keep the relationship open and create opportunities for future conversations.

Think about it

1. When you are worried about your child, how much of your time together becomes focused on their substance use or what needs to change?
2. What is one small way you could connect with your child that is not about substance use, treatment, or fixing a problem?

References:

Partnership to End Addiction. (2024). *The Partnership Model: A guide for peer parent coaches and families supporting a loved one with substance use challenges.*

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