

TEN RULES FOR LOVING AN ADDICT

By MAX Fabry

Being in love with someone in active addiction is pure hell! Yet, because we that love the person we allow the addict stay, think we are nurturing, and knowing that ‘I am the one to make (him/her) better. I can fix (him/her)’. I know this to be my truth because I married an active heroin addict, stayed with him through the insanity of his active use, and three years into his recovery process. I am a determined woman: I knew I could convince this cowboy that he belonged in a three piece pinstriped suit and didn’t need the drugs to live life to the fullest. WHAT AN ILLUSION! We were together for thirteen years. Quite honestly, when our family fell apart, it wasn’t so much HIS fault, as mine: I took my eyes off the goal: a healthy me. Having shared this with you, I don’t think there is any way to explain my feelings today as he now shares with people that he never loved me, and he never really wanted to marry me—I was just a convenient way to get money for his heroin addiction. He says this, and tells whoever will listen, because he is in a 12 step program that says he needs to live ‘a life of rigorous honesty’. Is this hurtful to me—EXTREMELY! BUT, he just celebrated 26 years of being clean and sober, and divorced from his second wife (who he married while he was clean and sober. Hmm?); whatever he is doing is working for him. I believe that all experiences are good if we learn from them. Since parting ways I have been able to work on ‘a healthy me’, and, now that I am an experienced addiction counselor, I am able to make sense of the thirteen years he was in my life. From this experience, I want to share ten lessons I learned having been married to this man,

- (1) **TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF:** Be sure that you are living in the NOW and taking care of your own basic needs: sleeping well, daily exercise, healthy foods, drinking water, doing something special just for you every day. Remember the airline oxygen rule: when there is an emergency and the oxygen drops down, you need to put it on yourself first—otherwise you are not going to be able to help anyone else.
- (2) **LEARN ABOUT ADDICTION:** While I was attending U of O for my bachelor’s degree (post divorce) I took all the classes available that dealt with addiction. Then came the internet and I became an information junkie! Everything you need to know is at your Google fingertips. Learn about the connection of addiction to the family, the brain, behaviors, medications available to help, the mind/body connection. Learn as much as you are capable of taking in without overwhelming yourself. Talk to others that have had, or are presently in the same situation. Attend an Alanon meeting and listen. My path led to becoming an addiction counselor; now, I hear it first hand from those that have lived it (in return, I teach them about living a substance free life). Learn everything you can about addiction, and take care of yourself.
- (3) **STAY OUT OF YOUR EGO:** Everyone needs an ego; it is it what makes each one of us unique. However, when we live entirely in our ego we are full of judgment, expectations, and undefined fears. Just because your loved one stops

using doesn't mean your expectations of 'how it will be when he stops using' will be fulfilled. My ex never did get a three-piece pinstriped suit. Most of all, even in recovery, we did not live happily ever after. It is important to step out of your ego and into your awareness to really see what is happening to you and your family. In awareness you may see that you did not cause your loved one's addiction, and you cannot 'fix' it. In awareness we operate from a platform of love, not fear, so all decisions are made from love not fear. Stay in awareness and take care of yourself.

- (4) **ADDICTION AFFECTS THE ENTIRE FAMILY:** While you are dedicating the majority of your life to 'fixing' your loved one, you are taking your eyes off the bigger picture: the children and the extended family. One of the hardest things for me to listen to in my office is a devoted spouse talking about how the children are being affected by the loved one's use. Children learn their behaviors from their parents. A woman recently shared with me how her 12 year old son is so sweet when it is just the two of them; when the dad, an active alcoholic, comes home, the son treats her the same way dad does: disrespectful and hateful. 'Obstacles are what you see when you take your eyes off your goals'. Is your goal 'fixing' your active addict, or, caring and nurturing your children? Be aware that addiction is affecting everyone the entire family system, prioritize your responsibilities, and take care of yourself.
- (5) **SEEK HELP FOR YOURSELF:** Addiction counselors also work with family members. Your life is going to change as you begin to heal—whether or not you decide to stay with your active addict, or, even if your loved one goes into recovery. Your counselor will help you learn new behaviors and will also help you start focusing on managing yourself vs. the addict. Changes you will start learning may feel uncomfortable at first—like a great pair of Italian leather shoes: pinches the toes at first, but then stretches to the contour of the foot and doesn't even feel like you have shoes on. You will learn to lovingly change reacting to your love one, and, instead, take positive action to 'change what (you) can'. Your counselor will encourage and support you taking care of yourself.
- (6) **KIND HONESTY IS THE BEST POLICY:** 'Kind honesty' is not about deliberately hurting other people's feelings. 'Kind honesty' is stepping out of your own denial about the situation. Recognizing what is happening to you and the family and speaking up to express your feelings. Asking for what you want and need. Teaching your children the same age appropriate lessons. Refusing to participate in dishonest behavior like calling in sick when your loved one is hung over. Paying attention when your loved one drinks all day and gets in the car to leave. 'Kind honesty' is taking action vs. burying your head. Most of all 'kind honesty' is knowing that you need to take care of yourself.
- (7) **BOUNDARIES:** Learn to set boundaries that you know that you will consistently keep. For instance: set a boundary about cleaning up or covering up for your loved one. 'No' is a simple straightforward word to use to maintain your limits.

Healing begins for you when you gain self-respect for lovingly standing your ground; the addict begins healing by being allowed to experience the consequences of his/her actions. Learn to set healthy boundaries, lovingly maintain those boundaries, and take care of yourself.

- (8) RELAPSE HAPPENS, TALK ABOUT IT: Unfortunately, relapse happens during the recovery process. Consult Lesson #6 for addressing relapse. Ignoring it isn't going to make it better. Talk about it. Dissect it: what led up to it, how did the follow through happen, where were the projected consequences in the thought process, how did the body feel. Talk until there are no more questions to ask and take care of yourself.
- (9) PATIENCE IS A VIRTUE: Know what your personal limits are; be very clear and very honest with yourself. Understand that recovery is a process that does not happen overnight. Just because the addict stops using doesn't mean it is over; addiction is about behaviors, and it takes attention, commitment, and time to change behaviors. Addiction is about disrupting brain function; new healthy pathways need to be formed. Addiction is about broken spirits; a spiritual center needs to be defined and cultivated. Everyone in the family has been affected emotionally, physically, and spiritual. Healing takes work, commitment, and patience. Be patient with yourself, and take care of yourself.
- (10) HEALING BEGINS WITH YOU: Unless you or your loved one is a drug dealer, or overzealous bar tender, there are no evil people in your picture of addiction. The addiction itself is evil, but you and your loved one got caught up in a terrible cycle called 'addiction'. Stay in your awareness throughout the recovery process operating from a foundation of 'love' vs. 'fear'. In your awareness you will see that things may not have turned out the way you wanted them to, but healing has begun for everyone; the cycle has been broken. When one person in the family becomes strong enough to heal, the entire family eventually heals. Start the healing: take care of yourself. Lesson #1!

These are the top ten things I have learned through my personal experience, my education, and, most of all, from those wonderful addicts and their families that trust me to be their guide on their journey to recovery. Do I regret thirteen years with an addict? Again, no experience is a bad experience if you learn from it. Today I am a lot healthier because I learned Lesson #1: take care of yourself. My ex continues to work on his personal recovery at his own pace and plan. (He still doesn't wear a three-piece suit.) I consider him one of my best friends; after all, if I hadn't met him, married him, and stayed on the journey with him, I may never have had the honor of being an addiction counselor. I may never have learned Lesson #1.

MAx Fabry, BA, CADCI, is a graduate of the University of Oregon, and is certified by the State of Oregon as an advanced Addiction Counselor. She melds ten years of qualitative research with counseling skills, and an abundance of life experiences to offer a unique selection of personal growth services. MAx has a private practice in Eugene, Oregon, where she offers individual addiction counseling insuring total confidentiality for her clients. Her approach for treating addiction is individual depending on what the core issues of the

client are, and the result of an ASAM assessment to help identify the degree of addiction. MAX's approach is holistic, believing that the mind, body, and spirit need to align in order for healing to begin. Read more of MAX's thoughts on addiction counseling at <http://www.lifestylechangescounseling.com/blog>