

# Six Survival Skills

For families and significant others who are affected by someone else's substance use



**Scottish Families**  
Affected by Alcohol & Drugs

One particular approach that family members have found helpful is the **Six Survival Skills** for family members and significant others developed by Dr Jan Ligon PhD in the United States.

Jan Ligon has a wealth of professional experience in the substance misuse field; however he has also experienced firsthand how difficult it is to have a family member with a substance misuse problem. In 2003, his son died at the age of 35 from using a combination of heroin and cocaine.

The **Six Survival Skills** can be useful to family members and significant others in learning new ways to address substance misuse in the family.

The six skills do not have to be followed in any particular order and some may be easier to master than others. It takes practice!

- Six Skills for Family Survival and Change*
- Separate yourself, detach from the problem
  - Set limits, roles, and boundaries
  - Solidify your position
    - know where you stand
  - Support “sobriety”
  - Simplify your approach by setting small goals
  - Sustain your physical, mental, & spiritual health



# Six Survival Skills

Understandably, the primary focus of professional and voluntary intervention has been on the person who has a substance misuse problem. However, there are far more people who are affected by substance misusers than there are those who misuse alcohol and other drugs and because of this, these family members - and significant others - have been described as "The Silent Majority".

Fortunately, more attention is now being given to the serious impact substance abuse has on families and significant others who live or work with a person misusing alcohol or drugs. Families (including spouses, partners, children, siblings, and others) are affected emotionally, physically, spiritually, and economically. Many family members live in a state of constant fear and uncertainty about what to do.

Six skills are summarized below that can be useful to family members and significant others in learning new ways to address substance misuse in the family.

## *1. Separate yourself, detach from the problem*

This skill can be the most difficult to grasp at first. Sometimes people hear this to mean that we should walk away from our loved one. Actually what is meant by separation is to become clear that the person who is misusing alcohol and other drugs has the substance misuse problem – not the family member.  
**It is very important to grasp this skill.**

## *2. Set limits, roles and boundaries*

Many family members have done things for substance misusers that seemed as though they could help. Calling in sick for substance misusers, taking care of their legal worries and many other attempts to help can actually make things worse by delaying them from having to address the problem. **Limits can be set to stop doing things that they should do themselves.**

## *3. Solidify your position – know where you stand*

As new ways of dealing with the problem begin to be seen by the substance misuser, there may be anger and hostility towards family members. By deciding on a position and sticking to it, the addicted person begins to learn that this is now the new way things are handled. This is good for everybody – the person misusing substances and the family. **Consistency is essential.**

## *4. Support "sobriety"*

There are many ways to support sobriety – to clearly let the substance misuser know that you are there for them in the recovery process.

Making compliments about positive change, attending appointments with the person concerned and asking them about their progress, are all examples of ways to support sobriety.

## *5. Simplify your approach by setting small goals*

Substance misusers must set small goals like "One Day at a Time." The same is true for families. A good goal is a small goal.

**Indeed families can become very overwhelmed and it is important to step back and set one small goal just for today.**

## *6. Sustain your physical, mental, and spiritual health*

All three of these drop off when people misuse substances and the same often happens to those who are affected by the problem.

Eating properly, getting exercise, taking breaks, and addressing spiritual needs are very important for family members. **Taking care of your personal needs is a must.**