



How to Make Lifestyle Changes

When someone you love is doing something you hate (smoking, overeating, drinking too much), staying silent isn't really an option. Here's how to encourage a change—without crushing his or her spirit.

by Maura Rhodes



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between lasting success and a lose-lose situation. "Family members expect unconditional approval from each other, and if a parent, spouse, or sibling suggests that a loved one needs to change, it can burst that bubble," says Alice Domar, Ph.D., a psychologist and the executive director of the [Domar Center for Mind/Body Health](#), in Waltham, Massachusetts. The fear of being the bad guy—or simply not knowing how to start—leaves most of us in one of two predicaments. We either wring our hands behind closed doors, or we let frustration build and explode during *American Idol* ("Ugh, that is your *sixth* cookie tonight!"). So how do you show tenderness during a tough conversation and get results? Start with this advice. Having "The Talk"

Here's a fun activity. During dinner, ask your husband if he really needs that second helping of macaroni and cheese. Make sure you raise an eyebrow, maybe pinch a little pudge on his waist. He will thank you for the extra push he needed to lose those 10 pounds, put down his fork, and then lace up his running shoes for a midnight jog. (You can't start soon enough!)

In your 32-inch-waist dreams. You may have the best intentions in wanting to help a family member with an unhealthy habit, whether it's a sister whose happy hour often stretches past dinnertime or a teenager who can't put down the pizza. But how you approach the conversation can be the difference

Heard the phrase “Love the sinner; hate the sin”? The same applies here. You need to broach the topic with concern and affection. Understand that, ultimately, you can support your loved one but you can’t snap your fingers and make things happen. “You can’t, and shouldn’t, try to control the person,” says psychotherapist Tina B. Tessina, Ph.D., the author of *It Ends With You: Grow Up and Out of Dysfunction*. The unhealthy behaviors that tend to upset other family members “are all about impulse control and using substances to feel better,” says Tessina. Which means, of course, that there are psychological reasons for why people succumb to bad habits and that the solution isn’t as easy as flushing away the potato chips.

Look for an opening. Your loved one may make it easy if you pay attention. “People often voice their dislike of a habit when they’re thinking about breaking it,” says Colleen Hurley, R.D., a wellness consultant in Northern California. So when your sister begins to bemoan her figure while you’re shopping together, use it as an opportunity. Say, “You know I think you’re beautiful, but if you want to lose weight, what can I do to help?” If you don’t get teed up so easily, or if you are dealing with a teenager who isn’t self-aware enough to see a problem, you’ll need to create an opportunity to talk. Don’t ambush. “Say you would like to talk about something important, and set a time to do it,” suggests April Masini, a relationship-advice columnist in Naples, Florida. And if you feel that you need to discuss things right now (hey, you see your dad only once a month and, boy, is he in a good mood!), at least begin with “Do you mind if I ask you about _____?” It gives the other person a moment to think and plan emotionally for what might be a touchy conversation, says Carol Landau, Ph.D., a clinical professor of psychiatry and medicine at Brown University. You could even write a letter if you anticipate resistance. Tuck a note into your husband’s pocket and tell him to read it later. Or mail a letter if the family member doesn’t live with you. Be sure to mention that you’ll check in if he doesn’t get back to you in, say, a week.

Be a nerd. Facts from books or articles can be inspiring to some people, especially kids, who often respond well to authorities other than Mom and Dad, says Alyson Schafer, a family therapist in Toronto and the author of several books about parenting. Instead of pleading with your 11-year-old son to choose healthier snacks, print out research on how diet affects athletic performance, then explain why eating peanut butter on whole-wheat toast instead of a cookie might help him score more goals on the soccer field. (You can also challenge kids to find information themselves; KidsHealth.org has a wealth of facts just for children.) This tactic may be key for a family member who relishes scientific details but is often dismissive of your opinions (a different problem, which you can tackle separately).

Know when to back off. Sometimes you don’t get a thank-you note for bringing up a sore subject. If a family member digs in her heels, you may have to cool your own. When can you approach the topic again? There are no hard-and-fast rules. “If your relative hints at it in any way down the road, try to reopen the dialogue,” says Landau. If she doesn’t, change your

approach. Suggest that she talk to her primary-care physician about the issue, or if it's a serious drinking problem or an eating disorder, offer to see a professional together. It's important to remember that change is a process. Even though your relative is seething, she may still be thinking about her problem as a result of talking to you. A study published in the journal *Addiction* showed that heavy drinkers who were pressured to change by family members were more likely to take a positive step forward (by seeking treatment or altering their behavior) than were those who received no family intervention. "It's possible that progress is happening after all," says Landau. Be patient.

Joining in on the Fun

Hooray, the conversation went well, and he's on board. Now what? "You've expressed concern and offered to support him. Now do it," says Tessina. That means modeling good habits (no cupcakes for you, either) and walking—or jogging, as the need may be—alongside your spouse, parent, sibling, or child.

Have another conversation. Ask your loved one to be honest about how you can help or how you're not exactly helping. Things that he might say: "I need you to stop making cinnamon rolls on Sunday mornings" or "I need advice on arranging my schedule so I can get to the gym more often." With a child, you'll have to take the lead, but you should let him offer solutions, too. "The kid who is old enough to get into a bad health habit on his own is old enough for the responsibility to get out of it," says Schafer. That is usually around age eight or nine, she says. Before then, the burden is yours. "Parents should work with the child to come up with a game plan—healthy after-school snacks, dessert only on weekends, a family bike ride every Saturday—then ask how they can play a supportive role," she adds.

Gulp—give up your own martini. Don't make your spouse live on Temptation Island: Create a home where it's easy to be good. Purge the junk food; toss the ashtrays; empty the liquor cabinet. "The more the environment suits the change, the easier it will be," says Ramani Durvasula, Ph.D., a clinical psychologist in Los Angeles. For example, research has shown that people who quit smoking are more likely to do so if there's a rule against lighting up in the house. If your partner needs to exercise more, do it with him. Or cook quinoa and salmon together. Misery (as he may call the absence of hot dogs) loves company. "It helps to distract a loved one from situations that trigger bad habits," says Hurley. So if your brother's social life revolves around barhopping and he wants to slow down his beer intake, offer to go to a movie or a basketball game with him instead.

Share your own struggles. Solidarity is empowering for anyone facing a challenge, but "Hey, I struggled with my weight once, too" is especially comforting for kids who might feel singled out. "It's important for them to hear that a parent went through something hard," says Schafer.

Cheerlead strategically. Encouragement looks different for children and adults and for men

and women. With kids, focus on the behavior rather than the numbers. Instead of “You’ve lost three pounds!” say, “I can tell you’ve been eating more fruits and vegetables. I’m proud of how you’ve stuck with it.” Your sister may need an enthusiastic “You look better than you did in college!” to motivate her. Your husband may just need a rah-rah romp in the hay.

Be there to catch a fall. People inevitably backslide; slipups are common. (A study by the [Hazelden Foundation](#), a nonprofit addiction-treatment center, found that smokers typically make 11 attempts to quit before achieving success.) “Your loved one needs support most when she falls off the wagon,” says Tessina. She may feel that she has failed, which may lead her to give up. Help her figure out what made her err by writing down what she was doing or feeling when she detoured so that she can identify triggers and avoid them. But if your loved one declares that she’s done making an effort, it’s not your place to convince her otherwise or to comfort her. “Tell her, ‘I’ll still be here when you’re ready to try again,’ ” says Hurley. Are You a Saboteur?

Your husband has decided to stop drinking. And while part of you wants to toast him with a virgin daiquiri, another part is considering spiking his morning coffee. Is there something wrong with you?

“I see this a lot in my practice. When one of my patients who had been obese all his life lost over 100 pounds, his wife started baking his favorite cookies and urging him to have ‘just one,’ ” says Nina Savelle-Rocklin, a psychoanalyst in Los Angeles. “At first she swore that she felt he deserved a reward, but eventually she admitted that his weight loss threatened her sense of superiority.” Psychotherapist Tina B. Tessina says, “This often happens to people who have trouble letting go of the status quo.”

Sound familiar? Here’s how to tame your rebel impulses.

1. Pinpoint your fear. Maybe you think that if your husband loses weight, he’ll leave you for someone else, or you’ll suddenly be the one in the relationship with the problem. To figure out what’s bugging you, brainstorm as many hypothetical outcomes as you can, no matter how far-fetched they may seem: *What if my sister doesn’t need me anymore? What if my husband becomes more attractive to others?*

2. Remember reality. Next, try to realize that your fears are unlikely to come to fruition. Tell yourself, *The reality is that my sister and I have been best friends since we were kids—and nothing will change that. Or, The reality is that my husband loves me and has never shown any sign of wanting to stray.*

3. Look on the bright side. Finally, force yourself to consider the nice things that could happen once your loved one’s situation improves. For example, you probably won’t have to worry about your husband’s blood sugar anymore, and, hey, your sex life might be a lot more

fun. Think long and hard about these good things, then go be a good mother, daughter, sister, or wife.

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