

FRIENDS & FAMILY GROUP

Cambridgeshire Recovery Service runs Friends and Family groups specifically for people with loved ones affected by drug and alcohol dependency. These groups are confidential spaces for friends and family members to receive support to manage their own well-being and mental health.

Mark facilitates our Monday face-to-face Friends and Family group in Cambridge. When speaking about the group Mark said "friends and family members often become stuck, they put their life on pause, and I love to see them growing in confidence and getting their lives back! People can be nervous about coming for the first time, but we often hear people say that they wish they had come sooner".

We asked Mark about his journey from attendee to facilitator of the group. He told us that his son was dependent on drugs "he would call me up all the time asking for money, we had people banging on the door asking for money. I was frightened, isolated and alone. I felt embarrassed so I didn't tell my friends. I didn't know what to do". During covid Mark needed major surgery. While he was in the hospital his son would call him for money. It got so bad that Mark's doctor took his phone away and told him he needed rest. "The situation was out of hand, and I was in pieces. I love my son and his dependency was ruining my life". Then Mark's son started to get clean and Mark learnt about Change Grow Live and Cambridgeshire Recovery Service.



"I wanted something positive to come out of all of this for mine and my son's relationship. That was when I joined the Friends and Family group".

Mark reported that he learnt so much from the Friends and Family group. "I learnt that I was enabling my son's dependency by providing him with money for food, clothes, or bills, that he would then go and spend on drugs. I realised that when my son was a child, I could set boundaries but as an adult who was dependent on drugs, I was unable to set boundaries. The lack of boundaries meant my son learned how to get what he wanted from me in our relationship. He would lie to me, disrespect me, badger me for money and verbally abuse me to get what he wanted from me" and then when he had it, he would leave Mark feeling worried, stressed, isolated and humiliated.

In Friends and Family group we teach friends and family members to set boundaries that they can stick to and enforce. Mark told us "one simple boundary for me was that if my son called and started asking me for money I would just hang up and block his number for 1 minute. The next time I would block him for 5 minutes and so on. This was a simple boundary that I could stick to. I was teaching my son how to treat me in our relationship by disengaging when he crossed the boundary. When I saw this working, I was able to set another boundary".

Mark explained that boundaries and self-care go hand in hand, "this is where the Friends and Family group becomes life changing because everybody supports each other. They validate each other, they keep each other going, and they remind each other that it's okay to say no, it's okay to take time out and it's okay to set boundaries and stick to them". Mark told us that more and more he sees that members of the group support each other; they share stories about what worked for them and give suggestions on things to try. Facilitators are there to give support and lead difficult conversations however Mark said, "it's wonderful to see the group members become champions of themselves and each other".

When people first come to the Friends and Family group they often don't say much, they just observe and take it all in. We let people open-up in their own time. Amy who facilitates our SMART Friends and Family online group said "when new people join they don't have to turn their cameras on if they aren't comfortable. Everybody is incredibly welcoming and instantly take newcomers under their wing. It's a really relaxed environment with no judgement and new people very quickly relax into the group and want to participate. We start each session with a check-in where everybody gets an opportunity to talk and go through their problems". Amy added "people are welcome to attend for as long as they need support and find it useful. They don't need to stop coming just because a loved one is getting better".

Often people think it's going to be a group where they learn to support their loved ones in a way that is centred around their loved ones needs. They do learn to support their loved one, but not always in the way they might have expected. Friends and Family group is not for the alcohol or drug dependent person, it's for the friend or family member themselves. A safe space for them to learn boundaries and self-care for their own needs. It's a space to talk about what's happening when you're isolated from your friends. Our members learn that they cannot control the behaviour of others, but they can make their own choices for their own well-being.

One of our community members who attends our Friends and Family group said "I heard about the Friends and Family group through a friend. I was at a breaking point in my life and the group has helped me massively". We asked them what they were most nervous about before their first visit and they told us "I was nervous about meeting new people and being vulnerable in front of them, but I am glad that I did it anyway because now I look forward to catching up with everyone and hearing people's stories. The group gives me great advice and I have made some good friends. I look forward to coming and knowing I have that space waiting for me makes my weeks more bearable". What would they say to someone who was thinking about attending the Friends and Family group but felt nervous to take that first step? "Just do it! This group has changed my life!"

When Mark joined our Friends and Family group, he wanted something positive to come out of his relationship with his son. He ended our interview by saying "I'm so proud of my son. I accept my son and I accept his addiction. He is now 3 years clean. I am proud of the journey he has taken to come clean. This group has also given me a purpose to live – it allows me to do something useful in life. That might be selfish, but I have learnt that it's okay to be selfish".

Cambridgeshire Recovery Service runs evening face-to-face groups in Cambridge and weekday and weekend online groups which are accessible from anywhere.

If you are affected by a loved one's drug or alcohol use and you'd like someone to speak to - join us!

Check our website calendar page for update information about when our Friends & Family Groups run.