

Coping strategies used by concerned significant others of people with addictions

What this research is about

Substance, gambling, and screen-related addictions (e.g., gaming, social media) can have negative consequences for concerned significant others. These consequences may include relationship conflicts, physical and mental health impacts, and financial stress. To manage these challenges, concern significant others often use a range of coping strategies. Some focus on changing the loved one's addictive behaviour, while others focus on protecting their own and their family's wellbeing.

In this review, the researchers looked at the types of coping strategies used by concerned significant others across substance, gambling, and screen-related addictions. They sought to build upon an existing framework for organizing these coping strategies to better reflect all three types of addiction.

What the researchers did

The researchers carried out a review of past studies in July 2024. They searched six research databases to identify studies published after 1990 that focused on addiction, coping strategies, and concerned significant others: PsycINFO, Medline, Psychology and Behavioral Sciences Collection, SocIndex, Cinahl Complete and Health, and Psychosocial Instruments.

To be included, studies had to focus on loved ones with an addiction and their concerned significant others, who were both at least 18 years old and had a significant relationship with each other (e.g., parent, spouse, sibling, child, or close friend). The addiction in question had to be related to substance use, gambling, or screen-based behaviours, and the

What you need to know

Addictions can have negative effects on concerned significant others (e.g., parents, spouses). In this review, the researchers looked at the types of coping strategies concerned significant others use across substance, gambling, and screen-related addictions (e.g., gaming, social media).

The researchers identified 64 studies. Most studies focused on substance use, followed by gambling. Studies indicated that concerned significant others use a range of coping strategies. Some are aimed at changing the loved one's addictive behaviour, like encouraging them to seek help. Others focus on protecting their own or their family's wellbeing, like seeking social support or caring for children. Only two studies looked at coping strategies concerned significant others use in relation to screen-related addictions. The findings can inform researchers and service providers on how concerned significant others cope and tailor supports to their needs.

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After identifying relevant studies, the researchers extracted data from each regarding study details (e.g., country, study design) and coping strategies used by concerned significant others.

What the researchers found

A total of 64 studies were included in the review. Most studies focused on substance use (64%) or

gambling (26%), with only two studies on screen-related addictions. Studies broadly included partners, parents, siblings, adult children, and other family members or close friends of loved ones experiencing these addictions. Most studies were conducted in Europe (25 studies), Oceania (24 studies), and North America (19 studies), with several studies taking place in more than one country. Across the studies, 82% of participants were women.

The types of coping strategies concerned significant others use are generally consistent with the existing framework. Most coping strategies serve one of two purposes. The first is to influence their loved one's addictive behaviour. For instance, concerned significant others might remind their loved ones of the harms caused by their addiction, ask them to reduce or stop their engagement, or avoid behaviours that reinforce the addiction. The second is to protect personal and family wellbeing. This might include seeking social support and protecting the family from the financial effects of addiction.

The researchers also identified several coping strategies concerned significant others use that are not yet captured in the existing framework. Some of these include supporting recovery after their loved one has started to make changes, protecting the wellbeing of children and other family members, improving the quality of relationship with the loved one, and dealing with crisis situations (e.g., police, court). Others include encouraging progress during recovery, responding constructively after a relapse, and using psychological or physical aggression to stop the addiction.

Overall, many coping strategies are shared across substance use, gambling, and screen-related addictions. However, the types of strategies that concerned significant others use depend on the nature of their relationship with their loved one with the addiction (e.g., spouse versus close friend). In addition, only two studies looked at coping strategies for screen-related addictions and evaluated how well these strategies work.

How you can use this research

The findings can be used by researchers and service providers to better understand how concerned

significant others cope with a loved one's addiction and tailor supports to their needs.

About the researchers

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Citation

Côté, M., Hardy, K., Blanchette-Martin, N., Gatineau, C., & Tremblay, J. (2026). Addiction across substance use, gambling, and screen: A scoping review of coping strategies adopted by concerned significant others. *Substance Abuse Treatment, Prevention, and Policy*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13011-026-00739-0>

Study Funding

Kim Hardy received funding from the Centre de recherche du CISSS de Chaudière-Appalaches, le CISSS de Chaudière-Appalaches et la Fondation Hôtel-Dieu de Lévis.

About Greo Evidence Insights

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