MQI project worker Will Carroll has a good idea why data on the number of Irish people with a loved one in addiction is so hard to find. Families are afraid to come forward. But their suffering is well-known to him. For the last ten years, in addition to his work at MQI helping people who are homeless and in addiction, Will has facilitated our Family Support Group in Riverbank every Tuesday evening.

**A hidden and damaging shame**

“It comes down to shame,” he says, shaking his head. “The hidden shame that is there. People are afraid to come and say, ‘my son is addicted to heroin,’ or ‘my sister is an alcoholic,’ or ‘my husband is a gambler.’ They’re afraid because it’s not even looked at by most people as an illness. Society sees addiction as something you brought on yourself. So by the time the family comes to us, or to another family support group, because of this stigma, it’s nearly too late. We’ve had families who’ve lost a child to addiction, and they can’t even grieve in a normal way. People have said to them, ‘Ah well, if you’re going to go taking drugs sure that’s what’s going to happen to you.’”

**Coping with the chaos of addiction**

So every Tuesday evening at the Family Support Group, Will works to break down the stigma. “Our goal is to try and help the families and extended families of those in addiction to cope with addiction and its many facets. Families are isolated, then they come into this group and they are supported by other families. More important, they are being listened to and understood in a non-judgemental way. Other group members share their experiences as well, and offer advice. They form this peer support which often operates...
outside the Tuesday evening. We encourage that. For me it’s the behaviours of addiction that the families have to engage with. My job is to find a way to help them cope with this.”

Lifeline to practical help
Whenever possible, Will advocates for families. “There’s an almost overwhelming amount of things to think about. There’s the emotional toll and mental well-being of the family, or there could be grandparents left to look after the children of the person who is addicted. There could be a physical toll, we’ve had people who are suffering parental violence. Or bank accounts cleaned out due to debt.

Intimidation is also huge for families dealing with addiction. So we’ll work to refer people into the right support services. Sadly, sometimes we are linking families in with bereavement counsellors. It’s the families who suffer all alone with these things.”

The most important thing to do
Through MQI, Will is working to fight the stigma faced by families of addiction on as many fronts as possible. If you are the loved one of someone in addiction, he says, don’t wait. “Just pick up the phone and call. Ring me, or another family support group. But don’t wait. Call.”

Numbers of Irish People With Loved Ones In Addiction Still Unknown
Precious little data exists about the number of Irish families with a family member or loved one who is, or has been, in active addiction. Scour the internet and you’ll find that existing data comes from elsewhere, via surveys of people who self-report. What’s more, addiction comes in many forms, not all of which are drug use. These factors make the data below to be far more likely an underestimate:

- 19% of people in the UK say they are related or connected to someone with a personal experience of addiction
- 25% of the population of Scandinavia’s capital cities say they know and worry about a person using drugs
- 46% of adults in the USA report they have a close friend or family member who has been addicted to drugs

Sources:
3. ‘Nearly half of Americans have a family member or close friend who’s been addicted to drugs,’ John Gramlich, Pew Research Center, 2017, https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/10/26/nearly-half-of-americans-have-a-family-member-or-close-friend-whos-been-addicted-to-drugs/