

Alcohol Use — Helping the User

Helping a friend or loved one who has a problem with alcohol can be very difficult. Even with the best of intentions, the family may encounter stiff barriers when trying to help. It can be easy to treat the person as if they are helpless, childlike or unable to change. The family may not want to confront the person because of the possible negative reactions or consequences. This can keep the family from seeking help or helping the alcohol user fully recognize their problem.

Finding the personal strength to confront this issue will be necessary. What to say and how to say it becomes the key to what reaction you may get from the person. You should prepare for the person to be defensive, but what can you do to deal with the situation?

Recognizing the warning signs

You may have some idea or a feeling that your friend or loved one is abusing alcohol. They may act differently when they drink, becoming argumentative or even aggressive. They may be missing work, or having financial difficulties. Other signs can include: drinking alone, hiding their drinking, blackouts or memory loss, and severe mood swings.

Knowing the risks

If you suspect that there is a drinking concern, also consider that there are medical risks involved. According to the National Institute of Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, “It is important to know and keep in mind that alcohol use can have serious physical consequences, including: alcohol-related liver disease, heart disease, cancer, pancreatitis and memory damage, just to name a few”. These consequences may not appear immediately, but can happen over time. Weigh your apprehension of talking to the person about their drinking against the medical risks to them if they continue.

Preparing to talk to the person

What are your personal concerns or fears in talking to the person? Are you afraid of how the person will react if you talk about their alcohol use? Fear of a negative reaction is common in this situation. It is certainly possible that the person will be defensive. Alcohol can affect many areas of life, and its negative impact gradually gets worse as the addiction becomes stronger. The use situation will not change overnight. Some of the warning signs have probably been seen and overlooked by the family. Talking to someone (trusted friends or family members) about your concerns may help with your apprehension. Remember that you are approaching someone who may not want to change. Consider asking another person to be with you when you talk to the person.

Have the appropriate resource information.

Before you start your discussion about the alcohol use, research what treatment options may be available in your area. Find out where the local treatment centers or professional substance use counselors are located. Places such as these provide assessments and make treatment recommendations. Another good source for treatment information is your family doctor. They would also be able to make a referral for assessments if you need direction. Your local Yellow Pages would also have names and locations of places that can help. Have the addresses and phone numbers at hand before you approach the alcohol user.

Be prepared before you talk to your friend or family member.

Think about what you want to say to the person. Write out questions and concerns you have. Plan your talking points. Here are some suggestions for consideration:

- Use a caring approach when talking to the person.
- Avoiding using harsh language or judgmental statements.
- Let the person know that you care and want them to find help for their drinking concerns.
- It is all right to express your concern about the person’s health and their wellbeing.

Pick a private and quiet place to talk with the person. Even with all this preparation, you may experience difficulties. Be prepared for the person to be angry and defensive. Approach the situation with a calm and caring demeanor. Remain objective; try not to take the comments made to you personally.

Getting the person to someone who can help

It is the hope of those who care, to get the addicted person to a safe place for help. If the person responds positively to your intervention, be prepared to use the information that you researched to set up an assessment for the person. While it can seem to be a relief when the person is in treatment, remember that there is a long road ahead that can still be difficult and full of adjustments. Do your best to be patient with the person who has been using, as well as with yourself.

Keep an eye on yourself

Throughout all the stress and difficulties with dealing with an alcohol user, it is easy to forget about your needs and feelings. The behavior of the user can sap your energy. You may have found yourself covering for the person, arguing, and even trying to ignore the things the person is saying to you. You may feel resentment from all the time spend dealing with the person's addictive behavior. These behaviors tend to take the focus away from possible recovery and time spent on the needs of the family. You may want to consider talking to a trusted friend, seek out a professional counselor, or find a support group in your area to help with your feelings.

Don't be afraid to ask for help! Explore local community resources.

Helpful Organizations

National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence

<http://www.ncadd.org> | 800.475.HOPE

For the user:

Alcoholics Anonymous

<http://www.aa.org> | 212.870.3400

For the concerned family:

Al-Anon

<http://www.al-anon.alateen.org> | 888.4AL.ANON

References:

Alcohol: What You Don't Know Can Harm You (2002). Retrieved June 28th, 2004 from the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism's web site: <http://www.niaaa.nih.gov/publications/harm-al.htm>

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