

Substance Abuse – Helping the User



The first step in coping with substance abuse or assisting someone who may have a substance abuse concern is just acknowledging that there is a problem. To those who aren't using, the physical and psychological damage that substance abuse causes may be very apparent, but for most users - it isn't. Users are unlikely to recognize that they aren't the only ones being affected by their use.

Recognizing the risks

Substance abuse can be hard to identify because it is easy – or perhaps just *easier* - to brush aside the signs and symptoms. For example, many substance abusers still have a job. Some will use facts of responsibility as “proof of competence” or as demonstration of how they do not have a problem.

It is important to know and keep in mind that substance abuse can have serious physical consequences, including: heart attacks, respiratory concerns, strokes, seizures, and weight loss just to name a few. These consequences may not appear immediately, but can happen over time.

Warning Signs

Some people become loud and combative while they are using. Others may become withdrawn and quiet. Other warning signs of substance abuse can include:

- Displaying severe mood swings
- Fatigue
- Weight loss
- Medical complaints, including watery eyes and runny nose
- Defensiveness, irritability, or agitation

Questions to consider

- Is the person losing time from work due to drug use?
- Is the drug use creating problems at home?
- Does the person show any remorse after the drug use?
- Are there any financial difficulties as a result of the drug use?
- Does the person use drugs to escape other problems?
- Has the person's motivation and ambition changed?

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How to attempt a conversation

Adults: Talking to someone about substance abuse can be difficult. It's easy to feel as if you're scolding, lecturing or even threatening the other person. Try to get past any anger you feel so you can talk about the person's substance use. The key will be to encourage the person to talk *with* you. Consider how to approach them. Be aware that the person may become defensive when talking about their use. Stay away from words that they might view as judgmental. You want to open the doors of communication. Use your listening skills. The person is likely aware that you have a concern about their substance use. By listening to what they have to say you can give them an opportunity to talk about their use and their view. Set a goal of getting the person to someone who can help (counselor, organization, or treatment center).

Avoid talking to the person while they are using. They will not be able to realistically look at their situation when they are under the influence. A good time to approach the person is after an episode, when they may be feeling guilty or remorseful about their situation.

Change is a very important aspect for a person to find their pathway to recovery. The person needs to want to change and should be encouraged to feel that they can accomplish a goal of recovery.

Children: Letting children know about substance use and abuse starts when they are young. By gradually sharing more with children as they age, you can help them shape their own system of identifying substance abuse concerns and how to avoid them. From ages four to seven, keep your conversations in the present and look for "teachable moments". For example, "watching TV with your child can provide a chance to talk about advertising messages. According to Kids Health, ask your child questions about the ads and encourage them to ask questions as well, such as "Do you think drinking beer makes people more popular or good-looking?" This can also be a good time to talk about good health and why substances might harm the body.

"The later elementary school years (ages 8 –11) are crucial in influencing decisions about alcohol use. Children at this age love to learn facts, especially strange ones, and they are eager to learn how things work and what sources of information are available to them." (Kids Health, 2004). This is the age that you want to openly discuss the facts about substance use. Facts concerning how substances affect the body, consequences of its use, and why it is dangerous for growing bodies can be a starting point. Be aware of your child's friends. Ask your child what they talk about.

For ages twelve to seventeen your teenager should know the facts of substance use and how it affects them. "Your aim should be to reinforce what has already been taught and to keep the lines of communication open" (Kids Health, 2004).

Elders: When talking with elders you may want to take a more subtle approach. "Focus on your concerns about the person and how their substance abuse affects you and your family." (Columbia University, 2000). Find a quiet place to talk about the substance abuse and avoid belittling the person in front of other family members.

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How can you help?

When the person with a substance abuse concern does agree to seek help, what should you do?

- Research your area. Identify where can you find help. There are different levels of care, depending on the needs of the user. Start with finding out where the person can go for a substance abuse assessment. Look for counselors in the area that specialize in substance abuse issues. Local substance abuse treatment centers typically provide this type assessment as well. Check your local yellow pages for phone numbers. You can also ask your medical doctor concerning assessments and/or getting a referral if necessary. The assessment can provide a recommendation for the type and duration of treatment necessary.
- Collect phone numbers, addresses, and assessment appointment times (if possible) to have on hand when you are talking to the person you are concerned about.
- Determine if transportation will be needed. Think about attending the first meeting, this may help the person take their first step for help.
- Remember the person's family may also need some extra support during this time.

Help yourself

Last, and certainly not least, look out for yourself. If you have been in a relationship with an alcohol or drug user it is easy to forget about your own needs. The behavior of the abuser 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 to cover their circumstances. Assess what you might need for your own health and well-being.

Some ideas for relief: Where can you look for help? A good place to start would be with a trusted friend or family member. You need to find a person who you trust well enough to be able to give all the details on what's been going on with the person who is abusing drugs or alcohol.

- Talk to a trusted friend or family member.
- Seek out a professional counselor in your area.
- Find a support group that has experience dealing with alcohol or drug use.

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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

Narcotics Anonymous

<http://www.na.org>

(818) 773-9999

Al-Anon

<http://www.al-anon.alateen.org>

(888)4AL-ANON

References:

Talking to Your Child About Drugs (2004). Retrieved June 15th, 2004 from KidsHealth web site: http://kidshealth.org/PageManager.jsp?dn=KidsHealth&lic=1&ps=107&cat_id=146&article_set=22656

How Can I Help My Alcoholic Granddaddy? (2004). Retrieved June 15th, 2004 from Columbia University Health Services web site: www.goaskalice.columbia.edu/1635.html

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