

UNDERSTANDING YOUR FRIEND OR RELATIVE'S ALCOHOL OR DRUG PROBLEM

If someone you know has an alcohol or drug problem, whether it is your spouse, another family member, a friend, or an employee, your support can be very important in helping that person change. This brochure is intended to help you better understand your friend or relative's alcohol or drug problem.

Change Takes Time

Alcohol and drug problems do not develop overnight. They also do not usually disappear overnight. For some people, it may be smooth sailing from the day they decide to change. For most people, change takes time.

Resolving an alcohol or drug problem can be like hiking up a bumpy hill. The goal is to get to the top. Most make steady progress. Some hit dips in the road. While these bumps may slow a person's progress, they do not have to stop it. In some ways, dealing with a drug or alcohol problem is like dieting. If people go off their diet for a day or two, it could affect them in one of two ways:

They could consider their entire attempt a failure, give up, and return to their old eating patterns. People who do this will not reach their goal.

They could view it as a temporary slip that sets them back slightly. They then can press on, determined to lose weight. People who do this are likely to have a better chance of reaching their goal.

The same kind of thinking can apply to a person's alcohol or drug problem. It would be great if the person never abused drugs or alcohol again, but slips do occur. How you react to your friend or relative's slip is important. Sometimes a slip can provide important lessons that can help prevent further slips. It is important to take a long-term view of recovery and accept a slip for what it is — one slip, and nothing more!

Understanding the Problem

We sometimes do things that are not good for us. There are usually reasons why we behave in such ways. Alcohol and drug use is no exception. The first step in trying to solve an alcohol or drug problem is to identify the reasons that led to the person's substance use. If people understand why and when they use alcohol or drugs, they will be better able to deal with their alcohol or drug problem.

Conditions That Trigger Alcohol or Drug Use

Triggers are factors that tend to lead to a person's alcohol or drug use. They do not necessarily cause a person's alcohol or drug use. Many things can act as triggers. They may be pleasant or unpleasant feelings or just normal situations. Here are some examples of possible triggers:

Unexpected Situations: a flight attendant offers free alcoholic beverages or a party where a friend offers marijuana.

Daily Routines: the weekly Friday night gathering after work, the Sunday tailgate party, or a holiday dinner.

Situations One Seeks: dropping into the local bar or going to a party where drugs are available.

Emotional Situations (positive or negative): an argument, meeting an old friend, being bored, or celebrating.

Stressful Personal Problems: financial problems, a job interview, or a court appearance.

Consequences of Alcohol and Drug Use

When people use alcohol or drugs, they are often seeking immediate “payoffs.” If people get a payoff from doing something, they will tend to do it again. Payoffs can include feeling more relaxed, feeling more comfortable with other people, or having a good time.

Unfortunately, alcohol and drug use can result in family, health, or legal problems. Although these problems can be serious, they do not usually happen overnight.

When people think about the consequences of their alcohol or drug use, they need to consider results that may have already developed or may develop in the future. For example, a person who drinks and drives might get where he or she is going. However, there is always a risk of an accident or being arrested.

Finding Options

Although the person who drinks or takes drugs is in the end responsible for his or her own actions, sometimes others can help. When thinking about helping someone deal with an alcohol or drug problem, it is important to consider the possible results of his or her attempts to control the substance use. Below are some possible options and possible results with respect to using alcohol or drugs.

Avoiding alcohol and drugs, and acting positively.

This is a hard course to follow. It is the most beneficial option. For many people abstinence is the safest alternative.

Avoiding alcohol and drugs, but acting in ways that are harmful.

Although people may not use alcohol or drugs during strong triggers, they may act in ways that result in equally harmful consequences. For example, instead of using alcohol or drugs, a person may become violent and hurt someone. It is important to address these behaviors as well as the substance use.

Using alcohol in moderate amounts.

For some people, using alcohol in moderate amounts may be a reasonable option. This may include drinking a glass of wine with dinner once or twice a week. For others, this may not work. The important thing to remember is that avoiding the harmful effects of drinking means avoiding alcohol in situations that have led to problems in the past and to drink at low-risk levels. It is important for people to think about the risks when deciding if moderate alcohol use is a reasonable option.

Using alcohol and/or drugs to excess.

Although harmful, this option is probably familiar to you. It is the one person you are concerned about who has used often.

Choosing the Best Option

Once people choose the best option for avoiding alcohol or drug use problems, the next step is to develop a plan to achieve that option. For example, if worries about money trigger alcohol or drug use, a good plan could include reducing these worries by paying all bills on time, consolidating debts, avoiding unnecessary purchases, and keeping a financial ledger. Whatever the goal, a plan can help people reach their goal.

In summary, the steps to solving the problem involve:

- Identifying triggers and consequences related to problem alcohol or drug use
- Developing options to drug and alcohol abuse
- Choosing the best option
- Developing plans to accomplish the goals, and
- Putting the plans into effect

Being Supportive

Recovery from an alcohol or drug problem should be viewed from a long-term perspective. Remember that your relative or friend did not develop a drug or alcohol problem overnight. It may take time to resolve. Your support is needed most when a slip occurs. If your friend or relative slips, help them get back on track and move toward their goal. Encourage your friend or relative to use the slip as a learning experience to help for the next time.

You Can Help

Be supportive, especially when the person first decides to deal with his or her problem.

Solving an alcohol or drug problem is not easy. Let the person know that you care about his or her progress.

Help the person identify and deal with high-risk situations (a party, for example) where a person is at risk of using drugs or drinking too much.

Is Treatment Necessary?

People address their alcohol or drug problems in many different ways. Some go to specialized alcohol and drug programs. Some get advice from their doctors. Others use self-help groups. In addition, like smokers, many people with alcohol and drug problems have successfully resolved their problems on their own. Support from friends and relatives like you can help people resolve an alcohol or drug problem.

For people who decide they want to quit abusing drugs and/or alcohol but cannot do it alone, there are many types of treatment available.

What Is Cognitive Behavior Therapy?

Behavior Therapy and Cognitive Behavior Therapy are types of treatment that are based firmly on research findings. These approaches aid people in achieving specific changes or goals.

Changes or Goals might involve:

- a way of acting - like smoking less or being more outgoing;
- a way of feeling - like helping a person be less scared, less depressed, or less anxious;
- a way of thinking - like learning to problem-solve or get rid of self-defeating thoughts;
- a way of dealing with physical or medical problems - like lessening back pain or helping a person stick to a doctor's suggestions; or
- a way of adjusting - like training developmentally disabled people to care for themselves or hold a job.

Behavior Therapists and Cognitive Behavior Therapists usually focus more on the current situation and its solution, rather than the past. They concentrate on a person's views and beliefs about their life, not on personality traits. Behavior Therapists and Cognitive Behavior Therapists treat individuals, parents, children, couples, and families. Replacing ways of living that do not work well, with ways of living that work, and giving people more control over their lives are common goals of behavior and cognitive behavior therapy.

The Association for Behavioral and Cognitive Therapies (ABCT) is an interdisciplinary organization committed to the advancement of a scientific approach to the understanding and

amelioration of problems of the human condition. These aims are achieved through the investigation and application of behavioral, cognitive, and other evidence-based principles to assessment, prevention, and treatment.

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