

Concerned about a family member's alcohol or drug use?

Factsheet for Families

Supporting a family member who is using alcohol or other drugs can be very challenging. It can be difficult to know how to respond, especially when the substance use causes changes to the way your family member behaves. However there are things that you can try that may help.

TRY NOT TO PANIC

It is important to remember that families have different ways of coping when a family member is using substances. It is normal to feel angry, upset, scared or helpless. There is no 'right' way to respond.

If you have just discovered the substance use, try not to panic. Not everyone who uses drugs will develop a problem, and most people will eventually cut back or quit their substance use all by themselves.

Some people do end up using substances for longer periods, which can lead to significant relationship, health, legal and/or financial problems. These may be the reasons that prompt you or your family member to seek help.

GET THE FACTS AND BE INFORMED

Learning about different drugs and their effects can help you understand the situation your family member may be in. It can also help you to identify the issues or risks that your family member is most likely to experience. Choose reputable sources for drug information, such as government websites or specialist alcohol and drug services.

KNOW WHAT HELP IS AVAILABLE

COUNSELLING is the most common form of treatment for problematic drug use. During counselling, people are encouraged to talk about their substance use and other related issues such as their health, relationships, behaviours and lifestyle. Sessions may focus on developing problem-solving skills, managing risky situations and identifying healthy coping strategies. Counselling is also available for family members and support people. Also available are a number of digital and online counseling options such as counsellingonline.org.au

DETOXIFICATION / WITHDRAWAL SERVICES is treatment where a person is supervised while their body comes off a drug. Withdrawal services may be offered in the home, via daily visits to a doctor, in a hospital or in a dedicated residential setting, and may involve medication. It is important to know that detoxification without an appropriate follow-up service (such as counselling or rehabilitation) is usually not enough to help a person stay off a drug. Self-withdrawal is also possible, but is not always easy. In some circumstances it can also be unsafe, especially for alcohol and benzodiazepine withdrawal.

REHABILITATION SERVICES help people who have detoxed off drugs to address issues in their life which contributed to their drug use in the past, including strategies to prevent relapse. Residential rehabilitation refers to live-in facilities (usually 3-6 months or longer). Non-residential rehabilitation services are usually structured 'day programs' that the person attends regularly while they are still living at home.

PEER SUPPORT GROUPS are voluntary self-help groups open to individuals seeking to address their drug and alcohol use, or to maintain abstinence, e.g. Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), Narcotics Anonymous (NA) and SMART Recovery.



TIPS WHEN TALKING WITH FAMILY MEMBERS

- Try talking with the person when they are not 'high' or 'coming-down'. Maintain open and honest communication. Ask questions. Listen. Try to understand the reason behind the substance use, and the purpose or function it has in their life.
- Let the person know how their drug use is impacting you. Use "I" statements, rather than "you" statements. Explain your concerns in a calm and clear way. Accept that they may not agree with you.
- Have clear boundaries about what is and what is not OK in your house, space and relationship with realistic, workable consequences.
- Separate what is about the substance use, and what isn't.

SUPPORTING CHANGE

There are things you can do to help someone who is attempting to change their use.

- Acknowledge and celebrate any positive changes, no matter how small. Things like using less, using in a safer way or improving their health and lifestyle, are positive first steps.
- Having a slip-up can be a part of the recovery process. It is also an opportunity to learn. Encourage them to keep going and to not give up.
- Encourage the person to develop good sleep habits, eat a healthy diet, exercise regularly, avoid 'triggers' (i.e. people, places or events associated with using) and get active by doing things like sport, hobbies, interests, social activities etc.
- Remember, people who are cutting back or quitting can experience low mood, anxiety, poor sleep and irritability.

LOOKING AFTER YOURSELF

It is important for family members to look after themselves.

- Ensure all other family members are safe, particularly if someone feels vulnerable or if there are children around. In some cases you may need to talk with children to help them understand what is happening.
- Connect with people who can support you. This can include other family members, friends, health professionals, community groups and financial planning support.
- Continue doing things that bring you pleasure and help you feel connected, strong and healthy. This could include seeing friends, exercise, hobbies, eating good meals or taking holidays.
- Avoid dwelling on the past. Try to maintain a sense of hope. Make plans so that you are looking forward to the future.

WHAT IF THEY DON'T WANT HELP?

If you are able to, still offer them support. See if you can enlist the help of other family members and friends to create a support network around them. Keep including them in family activities if possible. Do things with them to keep them engaged and to remind them that they are part of the family.

You can also encourage them to:

- stay connected with work, study, sport, interests and friends who don't use drugs.
- maintain their general health and hygiene (including having regular check-ups with their GP, sexual health clinic, dentist.)
- eat at least one healthy meal each day
- drink water and stay hydrated
- not drive when under the influence of a substance
- avoid mixing drugs
- not use alone and have a safe place to sleep or rest
- be safe sex ready
- not share equipment

WHERE TO GO FOR MORE HELP

- The Alcohol and Drug Information Service (ADIS) is a free, confidential 24 hour telephone service for Queensland residents. Ph: 1800 177 833
- Family Drug Support offer a free 24 hour telephone support line for family members and family support groups. www.fds.org.au Ph: 1300 368 186
- Parentline offer free phone counselling between 8am and 10pm, 7 days a week. Ph: 1300 301 300
- Kids Helpline offer free 24 hour telephone counselling plus webchat and email counseling. Ph: 1800 55 1800

Acknowledgements

"Tips for Families of People Who Use Methamphetamine". 360 Edge. 2016. www.360edge.com.au

"Tips and Tricks for New Players: a guide to becoming familiar with the alcohol and other drugs sector – 4th edition". ADCA. 2013. Family Drug Support, "A Guide to Coping" www.fds.org.au

