

Talking to a loved one about alcohol or drugs use

Talking to a loved one about drug or alcohol use can be daunting. They may not open up or respond the way you might want them to. Before starting the conversation, think about your own boundaries and what behaviour you are comfortable to support and what you are not. If your loved one is reluctant to talk openly, try to be patient, and assure them that you will be there to support them if they need to talk. The following may help you with the conversation:

- Prepare yourself in advance
- Choose your moment
- Consider using the 7 components of Positive Communication
- Be prepared to listen
- Get the facts, ask them questions about their substance use
- Show concern, and ensure they know how you're feeling too

Preparation: When raising a difficult subject for the first time, it will help to take some time out and plan what it is you want to say. This will help you to be specific and clear in what you say. By getting more information on alcohol or drug use you may feel better able to have the conversation.

Choose your moment: Your thoughts and views will not be fully heard if your loved one is under the influence of alcohol or drugs. Trying to talk to them with friends or other family members may cause embarrassment. Mention the subject when they seem to be relaxed and most likely to listen to you.

Listening: Listening is as important as talking. If you are open to what your loved one is saying and to the thoughts and feelings behind the words, you may understand their point of view better, even if you don't agree with it. Using open questions and allowing/encouraging them to talk will avoid the conversation coming across as a lecture or attack.

- Be willing to listen to what is said without interrupting, even if it is painful to hear
- Pay attention to their tone and body language as this can help you understand the feelings behind the words
- Acknowledge how they are feeling, and let them know how you are feeling too.

Positive communication: Use 'I' statements rather than 'you' statements.

'I' statements follow a basic format of three parts:

1. When (provide non-judgmental description of behaviour)
2. I feel (name your feeling)
3. Because (give the effect the behaviour has on you or others) or you may wish to express your feelings first; 'I feel...', 'when...', 'because...'

Avoid blocking communication by being dismissive, 'I don't want to hear your excuses;' or by avoiding it, 'I can't deal with this.'

When discussing difficult issues, try to avoid:

- Interrupting
- Raising your voice
- Dismissive statements
- Being an expert about everything
- 'Yes, but...'
- Changing the subject when feeling uncomfortable
- Negative emphasis
- Blaming
- Being defensive
- Not listening

'You have to...'

'Do you realise...?'

'It would be best if you...'

'You were being stupid.'

'Why do you do it?'

'I can't deal with this.'

'You have too...' - ORDERING
'It would be best if you...' - ADVISING
'You were being stupid.' - JUDGING
'Do you realise...?' - LECTURING
'I can't deal with this.' - AVOIDING
'Why do you do it?' - INTERROGATING

Above all, try not to argue, even when hearing something you disagree with. Once you've started talking, listen, show that you recognise your loved ones feelings, 'you feel strongly about this; you seem to be upset,' and describe your feelings and reactions to their behaviour, explain how it affects you. It can be hard to accept that someone close to you is making choices that concern you. You cannot change someone else, however, you have ownership of what you say and feel.