

Helping a Drug or Alcohol Abuser

If you suspect a family member or friend is abusing drugs or alcohol, there are many telltale signs that can help confirm your suspicions. Watch for these common and not-so-common signals that may indicate a drug problem, and learn how to intervene in a positive way. You can help save a life.

Understanding the Appeal of Drugs

Millions of people abuse and are addicted to drugs. Millions have also learned to kick their habits. Drug use can affect anyone, regardless of age, sex, ethnicity, social and income status, or lifestyle. Reasons why people start and continue to use drugs may include:

- Peer pressure
- Hereditary predisposition to drug or alcohol addiction
- Depression
- Mental illness
- Physical, sexual or emotional abuse
- Low self-esteem
- Family problems
- Stress
- Curiosity

Ease of access and social acceptance continue to make drugs and alcohol appealing choices. Drugs often are available from classmates at school or co-workers at the job site. With drugs being more popular and easier to obtain than ever, many people fall victim to substance abuse.

Signs of Drug Abuse

Watch for these warning signals that may indicate substance abuse:

- Sudden changes in behavior
- Irritability
- Hostility and outbursts of anger
- Depression
- Dramatic mood swings
- Paranoia
- Covert or secretive behavior
- Lying or withholding the truth
- Unpredictability
- Continued requests to borrow money or receive favors
- Missing items of value in the household

Also, watch out for these physical signs:

- Red, glazed or dilated eyes
- Speech deviations: talking too fast or too slow, or slurred or incoherent speech
- Slow or abnormal reflexes
- Decrease in responsibility
- Tardiness or absence from school or work
- Lack of interest or motivation in school or work
- Poor school marks or performance problems at work
- Social withdrawal from family, friends and peers
- Dropping out of favorite extracurricular or after-work activities
- Grinding teeth and other nervous behaviors

You may notice sudden or dramatic changes in:

- Personality and attitude
- Friends
- Hobbies and interests
- Style of clothes, hair or music
- Sleep routines
- Eating habits

Also look for the following tangible evidence:

- Possession of drug paraphernalia: needles, pipes, smoking materials, etc.
- Possession of large amounts of cash
- Needle marks on arms or other parts of the body
- Smell of alcohol or marijuana on the breath or clothing
- Observed associations with known drug abusers or dealers

Experts caution, however, that many of these signs may only suggest, and not prove, that the person is using drugs. Be careful about what you assume, and try not to jump to conclusions. Look for a recurrence of these signs over a prolonged period of time to substantiate your suspicions.

How to Talk to Someone You Suspect

If you believe that a family member, loved one or close friend is using drugs, show that person you care by attempting to talk to him or her about a potential problem. If you suspect your child is using drugs, do not hesitate to intervene immediately and help him or her get into treatment. When it is time to approach your friend or loved one, consider these tips:

- Think about what you want to say and how you want to say it ahead of time.
- Pick the right time and place, preferably a quiet, private setting when the person is not under the influence.
- Consider a professionally assisted intervention. In this action, a therapist helps you and other concerned family members, friends or co-workers put together a united front to gently confront the substance abuser and help him or her enter rehabilitation. Intervention by a group can thwart the alcoholic's or addict's tendency to rationalize his or her behavior or blame you.
- Adopt the voice of a caring friend, not a judgmental or preachy lecturer. Speak calmly and clearly.
- Express your beliefs and observations that you suspect the person is using drugs.
- Demonstrate your concern. Stress that you care about the person's safety and well-being.
- Offer to help the person enter rehabilitation. If it is your child, insist on getting help together as a family. If it is a relative or friend, offer to accompany the person to counseling and treatment sessions, and pledge your support through the recovery process.
- Do not expect your talk to go smoothly. The person may deny that he or she is using drugs, resent your suspicions and react angrily.
- Remember that it is not your job to change the person. The drug abuser must want to change and be willing to seek treatment. Keep in mind, however, that it is your responsibility to get help if your child is abusing drugs.

Resources

- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration: www.samhsa.gov
- Cocaine Anonymous: www.ca.org
- Marijuana Anonymous: www.marijuana-anonymous.org
- Narcotics Anonymous: www.na.org
- National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence: www.ncadd.org
- National Institute on Drug Abuse: www.nida.nih.gov
- Alcoholics Anonymous: www.aa.org
- National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism: www.niaaa.nih.gov