



How to talk to someone

Be prepared

Writing down the main points you want to talk about can help you to formulate and remember your ideas during the conversation. You may also wish to rehearse, or role play with a trusted friend prior to having the conversation. Points you may want to consider:

Focus on your concern about the individual's drinking or substance use. Remember to use "I" statements that express your feelings and your concerns, and the ways that you are impacted by their alcohol or substance use. Do not bring up past hurts or resentments you have experienced. Try to express observations that are not loaded with judgments or strategies. For example, "I've noticed at times you've been acting [differently, erratically, confused, impaired, etc.]. That's made me feel concerned about your alcohol or substance use. I'm really worried about you."

Ask open-ended questions and avoid labels

Ask open-ended questions that avoid yes/no answers.

"Can you tell me more about what's going on with you?"

"It seemed like you had some problems recently, could substance use have played a part?"

"You seem different lately, a little distant - can we talk about what's going on?"

"Are you ok talking about your substance use - do you think it might be a problem?"

Avoid using labels like "alcoholic" or "addict." Instead, focus on the person and their behavior instead of the label. People who are struggling with abuse or addiction can become upset or defensive when labeled.

Try to be understanding. Use caring, not blaming, statements such as "I know that you've been having a hard time at work and you've been feeling more pressure," or "I know that you're feeling more stressed than usual."

Offer options

Offer choices instead of demands. Present options by saying something along the lines of "Would you consider seeing someone to talk about your substance use," instead of, "You need to get help." Even though you think it's obvious the individual should seek help, it's always up to the person to decide what course of action is best for them. You can suggest they seek help, but you can't force someone to do something they're not ready to do. Let them know you are available if and when they want help.

The conversation

As the conversation develops, you may become concerned about your relationship with the person and whether it's being damaged. It's worth remembering the relationship can be repaired later, but the person you're speaking to may be in serious need of getting help now. Most importantly you must communicate your care and concern – not your judgment. Avoid anger or frustration.

Often, there will be resistance based on fear and shame. At first, few people admit they have a problem. It's better to allow the conversation to close without a resolution than to keep it going too long, where it may escalate to frustration or anger. Several approaches may be necessary, and enlisting help from other people may also be a good option.