

Concerned about someone's drinking?

Some common problems

In families where someone is drinking heavily, there may be a number of problems.

- ★ People may drink to deal with stress, but the drinking can make the situation worse, it's a vicious cycle.
- ★ It may be difficult to know how a heavy drinker is going to behave next, which causes tension and uncertainty within the family.
- ★ Communication within the family can become difficult.
- ★ Everything can start to revolve around the drinking, if that is the only thing the family think and talk about.
- ★ The family can feel ashamed of the drinker's behaviour and become cut off from everyone outside.
- ★ There may be arguments or violence.
- ★ Children may understand more about what is going on than their parents realise and this can be reflected in the way that they behave.
- ★ The drinker may not be taking responsibility for the things that they used to e.g. paying bills or doing household jobs. Other family members may have to take over these tasks causing added stress and leading to resentment.
- ★ Practical difficulties may include accidents, money, sex, legal and health problems – some of these for example; sexual problems or incontinence – may be embarrassing to talk about.

Why do people drink?

We associate drinking with enjoyment and celebrations, but we also often use alcohol when we feel worried and unhappy, to make ourselves feel better. Alcohol can help us to feel more confident in company, and can play an important part in our social lives. People learn that having a drink is helpful in certain situations and, as the habit builds up, they can find it hard to manage on these occasions without a drink. Also someone can become physically dependant on alcohol. This means that they get used to always having alcohol in their bloodstream. If they stop drinking suddenly, they are likely to develop unpleasant symptoms and may need medical help.

Taking care of yourself

Worrying about one person in the family leaves you drained of both energy for yourself or anyone else. Both in your own interest and everyone around you, you need to take care of yourself.

Being involved with someone with a drink problem is difficult and you may need support. Heavy drinking is quite a common problem and lots of people will understand how you will, so try not to be embarrassed to talk about it. Family and friends may be able to offer help.

It is important to look after your health, if you get run down and anxious you are likely to become ill, so you should think about how you deal with pressure. You might like to think about finding ways of relaxing, also if you have other things in your life outside of the family you are more likely to feel that you can deal with the difficulties within the family and keep a clear view of the situation.

You need to be clear what you are prepared to accept from the person who is drinking, and if they overstep these boundaries know how you are going to react. This is especially important if there is a risk of violence. Make sure you know who to contact, where to go and that you have enough money if you need to leave in a hurry. You should never have to tolerate violence or abuse.

We are all responsible for our own behaviour, so don't accept blame for someone else's drinking. On the other hand, you are responsible for your reactions to it. It's not a good idea to try drinking along with them or arguing when they have had a large amount to drink.

Remember you have the right to a reasonable life. If someone else's drinking is making your life difficult and there does not seem to be a real prospect of change, you may want to consider parting.

How to help

Neither you nor anyone else can make someone stop drinking; the drinker is the only one who can do this. However you can encourage them to make changes.

- ★ Talk to the person you are worried about. Find a time when they are sober and when you are both calm.
- ★ Tell them about the problems their drinking is causing.
- ★ Listen to them. Find out how they are feeling, and how it helps them.
- ★ Avoid getting into arguments; it will make it more difficult for them to talk openly to you about things in the future. It is best not to sound as if you are "nagging" or "accusing".
- ★ Make clear what behaviour you will not accept- and stick to it.
- ★ Make clear what actions you will take should the behaviour persist.
- ★ Discuss with other family members what you are doing, their support will be a help to you and will make it easier for everyone to take a similar approach.
- ★ Don't make it easy for them to drink by buying their alcohol for them, giving them extra money or always agreeing to go to the pub with them.

- They are more likely to take you seriously if your actions match what you are saying.
- ★ Help the person who is drinking to be realistic. Don't encourage them to make promises that they cannot keep. For example the promise "I will never drink again" is very difficult to keep.
 - ★ Help the person to see the effects from their drinking this may encourage them to change more quickly.
 - ★ Don't try to hide the effects from the drinker or other people, e.g. phoning work with excuses, cleaning up the mess, putting them to bed, missing social events for fear of embarrassment.
 - ★ Encourage the person to concentrate on the effect the drinking is having on their life, rather than asking them to accept a label such as "alcoholic".

Expectations and Goals

Once you are able to talk openly about the drinking you can start to discuss and try to agree on what changes you would like to see. There may be a difference between what would be ideal from your point of view and what is realistic in the circumstances. It may be that the safest and most realistic way for the drinker is to make a slow reduction in what they are drinking, to stop drinking immediately is not usually the best option. Some people find it easier to eventually cut down to a safe amount others will find they need to stop drinking all together. It is important that you discuss these changes together and are both clear on the direction that you are heading. It is also important to acknowledge that things will not always go smoothly, there will be difficult moments but it is important that you can both be honest and open with one another. It can take several attempts before lasting changes can be made, if you can see that the drinker is making a serious attempt then be supportive and encourage them as much as possible. Although remember you have to consider yourself and there is a limit to what you can give.

What happens if they do change?

When someone reduces their drinking they, and you can expect many things to improve (health, finance, etc). However it is unrealistic to expect everything to be perfect. Your relationship is likely to change in a lot of ways.

Up until now you may have had to take on most of the responsibilities of the home/family. Gradually the person who has been drinking may want to play a fuller part in things. You may find it difficult to feel safe in handing over some of the responsibility. You need to find the right balance between making sure things get done, and showing that you trust them. It may be difficult for you to come to terms with them becoming a more independent person.

Be aware that maybe some changes that you thought may occur, e.g. relationship problems may still be there, this may require more time or perhaps the problem already existed. Don't expect everything to be perfect straight away and also accept that sometimes change is hard to adjust to and takes time.

Maintaining the change

When someone first starts to change their drinking the effects may be quite dramatic and this can be rewarding for everyone concerned. Watch out though for the end of this honeymoon period when things start to become routine. It will take some effort to maintain the changes made, things can so easily slip back to the way they were if you allow them to.

Some things to consider:

- ★ The balance of who does what in the relationship
- ★ Developing and keeping new interests
- ★ Not forgetting to still give encouragement and praise, while not constantly focusing on the past.

What happens if they don't change?

Despite your best efforts there is always the possibility that the person you are worried about may not make the changes you had hoped for. You need to be prepared for this; sometimes no matter how much we want someone to change, until they are ready to change this will not happen. It may be that now is the time to review what you expect and what you are prepared to tolerate. Perhaps you need to think about what changes you could make in the way your relationship works.

- ★ Should one of you move if you are living together?
- ★ Do you want to spend less time with the other person?
- ★ Do you need to re-think your role within the relationship?
- ★ Are you able to reduce your sense of responsibility for the other person and allow more time for yourself?

Some points to remember

- ★ People can change their drinking
- ★ You are not responsible for other persons drinking, but you can play a part in helping them to change.
- ★ Your relationship is likely to be altered and you will both need to make adjustments.
- ★ We all have a right to a reasonable quality of life. Take care of yourself and don't be afraid to make changes in any relationship that isn't working.
- ★ Professional help is available; you don't have to deal with things on your own. Here at IMPACT we offer support and advice to individuals who are concerned about someone's drinking. Do not hesitate to call.