



When Your Friend Has a Drug or Alcohol Problem

A Guide for Gay and Bisexual Men

From the outside, addiction can seem hard to explain, frustrating, and contrary to all logic, especially when it's someone close to you with the problem. How long do you watch the harm being done before you step in? *How can I help when I don't even understand what's going on?*

Addiction is a chronic disease and, like others, can be more easily and successfully treated when recognized early. Although individuals do have to make the decision to quit for themselves, that doesn't mean you can't do anything to move the process along. Stubborn myths like, "You can't do anything unless an alcoholic wants to stop drinking" or "Drug addicts have to hit bottom before they want help" are common but not true. Friends and family members can play a major role in motivating loved ones to seek help.

When you're ready to help, you may be confused by all the conflicting advice that's out there. Let him hit bottom or get involved now? Tough love or unconditional love? A surprise intervention in the living room with all his friends or a gentle one-to-one over coffee? Which strategy is the right one?

Everyone has different needs, communication styles, reasons for using, and readiness for quitting. You know a lot about your friend's personality and may be able to choose the helping strategy that's most likely to work. You may have to try several different approaches before something clicks. This guide offers a place to start.

Understanding addiction

Before you toss on your superhero cape, it may help to recognize a few critical points about addiction. **First, no one ever thinks he will get addicted.** The crossover line between casual party use and dependence is sneaky and hard to predict. Most stumble over it quite unexpectedly and without even knowing it. Our society values will-power and self-reliance, and people generally think they can control their behaviors and manage the consequences. Try not to blame your friend for losing that control.

Second, alcohol and drugs cause immediate and profound changes in brain chemistry which result in powerful pleasure cravings and mood swings. At the same time, the brain may start losing its ability to process information and make decisions effectively. An addicted brain gets rewired to choose big doses of pleasure (or relief from pain) at the expense of other options. This may explain why your friend keeps getting drunk or having risky sex while high even after he swears he won't. A brain impacted

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Addiction is both biology and psychology. While the cycle of withdrawal-craving-reward is certainly

driven by changes in brain chemistry, it is also shaped by deep and often difficult emotions. We often call these our "issues," and they can include anything from poor self-image to internalized homophobia to serious depression or anxiety disorders. Don't assume he can just "snap out" of his problems with the right prescription or a couple of therapy sessions.

Finally, the term "addict" is largely negative in our society. While 12-step philosophy insists that publicly declaring oneself to be an addict is a critical and even liberating step towards recovery, most people associate the term with failure, shame, criminal activity, and irresponsible self-neglect. It's difficult to take on a label like that. So don't insist that your friend does. To start, it's enough for him to simply acknowledge a problem. *What you call that problem*

- addiction, dependency, a tough time - is less important than *how* you talk about it.

■ Having “the talk”

You may feel anxious about talking with a friend about his drug use or drinking. *How will he react? Will he think I’m being nosy or intrusive? What if I push him away?* These are common fears, but fears well worth facing when it comes to his health and your relationship. He might actually be waiting for you to say something, afraid to bring it up himself. The chance is worth taking.

It’s never easy to have this conversation. And when you do, it will probably put your friend on the spot and be embarrassing for him. He may even become angry or deny everything. We often accuse people of “being in denial” when they seemingly refuse to see what’s going on. But silence or flat out rebuff is not always a reliable sign of someone’s awareness of his problem. It may actually be his way of handling an emotionally threatening situation. Most people with substance use problems know on some level that things aren’t going well. Even if your friend doesn’t admit that to you openly he may very well feel it or fear it deep inside.

Here are some suggestions on having “the talk:”

1. Before you do anything, **make a plan**. What do you want to say? What’s your goal? Writing down your thoughts may help you organize a strategy and feel calmer.
2. **Pick the right time**. Avoid when he’s drunk or when he’s too tired and cranky after a high. The time after a binge may be best, when he might feel more conflicted about his behavior.
3. Don’t start by accusing him of being a drug addict or alcoholic. **Let him know that you really care** about him and your relationship and that things have been different lately.
4. **Focus on his specific behaviors** or the changes that concern you. “I’m worried about your weight loss,” or “You’ve never had unsafe sex before,” or “When you promised to go to dinner and didn’t show up, I felt disappointed.”
5. **Talk about the effect** your friend’s drinking or drug use has on whatever he cares about most: career, children, relationship, etc. He may care deeply about what the problem may be doing to those around him.
6. **Don’t preach** about future health risks. Most

people already know that drugs and alcohol are bad for them. Addiction forces a “right here, right now” orientation; people often can’t see far ahead and have a skewed picture of the past. Instead, focus on behaviors and consequences happening right now.

7. **Notice your tone**. If you feel frustrated, sad or upset, say so sincerely but not angrily.
8. Let him respond. It’s normal if he gets angry or defensive. **Allow him time to process** those emotions.
9. From the beginning, reassure him that even though you may not like his behavior or his choices, you still like him. **Highlight his qualities that you still appreciate**. These positive qualities may be critical strengths for him during this rough time.
10. **Take a list** of resources with you. If you offer to go with him for help, follow through if he asks.

■ We talked. Now what?

What if he’s not ready for help? Don’t despair or take it personally. Let your friend know that when he is ready for help, you’ll be there. Don’t think you didn’t present your case. You have planted a seed of recovery that may grow when you least expect it. The goal

is not to “rescue” your friend from his problem. Your role is to **maximize the chances that he will seek help**, without losing yourself along the way.

In the meantime, be careful that you **don’t get caught up in his behavior**. You may find yourself reacting to your friend’s behavior by

focusing on him, what he does, where he goes, or on how much he drinks. You may even try to control his drug use, perhaps by holding his ATM card for him. But getting too involved usually leaves you feeling frustrated and your friend feeling distrusted. That’s a recipe for conflict.

On the other end of the reaction spectrum is *enabling* or overprotecting your friend from the negative consequences of his addiction. **Do not cover up for him**. He needs to feel the downsides of his drug use or drinking even if it’s hard to watch.

Remember that **his drug use is NOT your fault** and you are not responsible for his struggles or successes in recovery. All you can do is talk honestly with him, show him you care, and encourage positive steps. Helping a loved one with a drug problem is hard work. Find support if you get discouraged. Talk

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