

Alcohol Use Disorder (alcoholic)

How Do I Help An Alcoholic Family Member?

Watching anyone struggle with alcoholism is tragic, but the struggle is even greater when the person is a loved one. Even though things may seem helpless, they aren't. There are many ways that you can help an alcoholic family member.

What Is An Alcoholic? An alcoholic is a term used to describe someone who has an alcohol use disorder (AUD). An alcohol use disorder is a pattern of alcohol use involving difficulty controlling one's drinking, preoccupation with alcohol, and continuing to use despite personal and professional consequences. It further includes having to drink more to achieve the same desired effects (also called a tolerance) and experiencing symptoms of withdrawal upon sudden termination or rapid reduction of alcohol use. Someone with an alcohol use disorder has both a physical and psychological dependence on alcohol.

An alcohol use disorder can range in severity from mild, moderate, to severe. Mild alcohol use disorders may quickly develop into more severe alcohol use disorders. The sooner someone decides to enter treatment for their alcoholism, the less likely they are to reach a severe addiction. Alcoholism is not as simple as a choice that can be easily controlled because it is more of a compulsion. Individuals with alcoholism may not be able to simply quit on their own without help.

Who Does Alcoholism Affect? Many alcoholics believe that alcoholism affects only themselves. However, when one member of a family has an alcohol use disorder, it affects the entire family. The family dynamic, including mental and physical health, as well as finances, are negatively impacted by the loved one's drinking. Oftentimes, the home environment becomes unpredictable or even tense. Common responses from family members may be to make excuses for their loved ones drinking, deny there is a problem, or attempt to control their loved one's behavior. As a family member, you may wonder what you can do to change or help the situation. At times, you may also find yourself questioning whether or not your loved one even wants help. Alcoholism is a disease that should be treated with compassion and care. Below are 10 tips to help a family member who has an alcohol use disorder:

1. Educate Yourself About Alcohol Use Disorders: One of the first and most important steps is to learn what an alcohol use disorder is. By gaining a better understanding on the disease of addiction, one can gain insight into whether or not they believe their loved one actually has an alcohol use disorder, or alcoholism. Alcohol use disorders are more than just drinking a lot. Alcoholism tends to develop gradually over time and often runs in families.

The actual cause of alcoholism is still unknown; however, it is known to develop when someone drinks so frequently that it results in chemical changes in the brain. When these chemical changes occur, it increases the release of dopamine in the brain, resulting in an increase of pleasurable feelings, making one want to drink more often and more heavily, despite personal or professional consequences. After time, the pleasurable feelings associated with drinking dissipate, leaving the individual in a state of dependence where they have to drink in order to feel "normal" and as a way to prevent withdrawal symptoms from occurring. As a family member, the more you understand about alcoholism, the better,

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so that you can better attempt to understand what your loved one is going through. The next step is preparing to talk with your loved one.

2. Prepare And Practice What You're Going To Say: It is strongly recommended to take time to prepare, on paper, what you intend to say with your loved one. Try to be supportive and remind them that you care, while avoiding statements that are negative or harsh. It is best to convey in words a specific concern you may have while using "I" statements. When we use "I" statements, it reduces accusation and allows us to articulate how we are feeling. An example includes, "I really care about you. I am concerned about your drinking, and it worries me." Showing respect while being supportive is crucial; however, it is also pertinent to be prepared for various responses. You may not receive the response you are hoping for. Do not give up hope, as when you bring up your concerns it allows you the chance to share your feelings and be heard.

3. Make Sure Your Loved One Is Sober: When you are ready to have a conversation of support and concern with your family member, make sure your loved one is sober. This way, they are coherent and have the capacity to fully hear and understand you and your concerns. Also, be particular with where you decide to have this conversation. Make sure you choose a quite safe place for this conversation so that you have privacy with no distractions.

4. Listen Openly And Honestly: Being honest, open, and compassionate helps tremendously when sharing with your loved one your concerns about their drinking. Be prepared for defensiveness. If possible, try to roll with the resistance. Share with compassion your concerns while offering your support to your family member. Be sure to listen intently and not interrupt them while speaking. This allows for open dialogue and invites honesty and trust.

5. Offer Support: It is important to be empathetic, compassionate, and understanding. Provide reassurance that you will be there to help your family member as much as you can. Be sincere. Imagine what it must be like to be in the other person's shoes and convey that empathy when expressing yourself. The best outcome would be to have your family member agree to enter treatment. Providing a list of residential treatment options may be beneficial. If your loved one agrees to quit or cut down, make sure that they make sincere commitments, and be sure to follow up with them on those commitments. Holding your family member accountable for a decision to change is important. Remember, actions speak louder than words.

6. Consider Involving A Professional: Having a private conversation with your loved one about your concerns regarding their drinking is not the same thing as having an intervention. If your loved one is resistant or unwilling to admit they have a problem, it may be beneficial to consider meeting with an addiction professional to plan an intervention. An intervention for alcohol use disorders involves an addiction professional, family members, colleagues, close friends, and other loved ones getting together to confront and urge their loved one to enter treatment. They meet first to plan, on paper, what they intend to share, and follow-up with consequences if their loved one does not agree to reach out for help and enter treatment.

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7. Stop Trying To Control Your Loved One: If your family member is unwilling to seek treatment, it is important to stop trying to control the situation. The biggest challenge in helping an alcoholic family member is when they are in denial that they have a problem. They may even attempt to blame external circumstances or other people for their drinking despite how obvious it may seem to others around them. Unfortunately, until the loved one with an alcohol use disorder admits they have a problem, there isn't much that a family member can do. Approaching a conversation with an open ear to listen, expressing your concerns with compassion and respect, and offering to help are all great ways to approach the situation. When we attempt to help an alcoholic family member by controlling them, such as forcing them to go to treatment or forcing them to quit drinking, we may find ourselves taking on the burden of not being able to make them change when you want them to.

8. Avoid Co-Dependency: After you have attempted to implement all of these measures, it is important to remember that you cannot force a loved one to enter treatment unless they are ready. The best options are to offer support, listen intently, provide resources, and follow-through with any consequences you set forth with them.

Co-dependency is when a person in a relationship is controlled, manipulated, or feeling they must rescue a loved one who is typically requiring support due to an illness, such as alcoholism. It is a dysfunctional and imbalanced relationship that leaves the family member taking on responsibility for things that are out of their control. This may leave them feeling overwhelmed and drained. Other indicators of codependency include:

- Overreacting and taking on your alcoholic family member's thoughts and feelings
- Needing your loved one to behave in a certain way in order to feel "okay"
- Feeling overwhelmed with thoughts, worries, and anxiety about your loved one
- Attempting to fix others rather than focusing on yourself
- Trying to control your loved one
- Taking responsibility for your loved one's behaviors

9. Set A Healthy Example: Set an example for healthy living by giving up recreational drug and alcohol use. Setting firm and healthy boundaries is also a great way to set a good example for your loved one. Attending a support group, such as Al-Anon, is a great way to show your loved one that help is available to everyone. Remember, actions speak louder than words.

10. Help Yourself: It can be very difficult watching an alcoholic family member struggle, especially when they are not accepting your help. We often want to do everything we can to make an impact on our loved one in order to force them to change, but the only person we can truly change is ourselves. Attending support groups, such as Al-Anon, is a healthy way to focus on yourself and meet others who can relate to your situation. It is also a great place to find hope. Engaging in activities that you are passionate about, such as hobbies or recreational activities, or spending time with family or friends is a great way to live your life and focus on what you can control.

11. Seek Professional Help As Soon As Possible. Start at <https://alcoholtreatment.niaaa.nih.gov/how-to-find-alcohol-treatment/step-1-search-trusted-sources-to-find-providers>