

Drug use in the family

Having a family member who uses drugs can be a source of immense stress, conflict, worry and despair. It is normal to feel helpless, frustrated, worried and upset by someone's drug use. People who use drugs can behave very erratically, and it can be difficult to know how to act around them. Their substance use may contribute to them acting in distressing ways. They may become aggressive, angry and violent, or withdrawn and detached. All members of the family can be affected, and while there are no simple answers, the following strategies may help.

How can I tell if someone is using drugs?

It is difficult to tell with any certainty that someone is using drugs. The effects of drugs vary greatly from person to person. Changes in behaviour or moods may indicate drug use; however, these changes may indicate an issue in the person's life that is not drug-related.

Signs that appear to be uncharacteristic of the person may require your attention, regardless of whether drugs are involved. These signs include:

- Mood swings
- Tiredness
- Explosive outbursts
- Minimal interaction with family
- Trouble with the police
- Changes in eating patterns
- Frequent absences from school/work
- Sudden changes of friends
- Unexplained need for money
- Declining school/work performance
- Impaired memory
- Decrease in activities that were important to the person previously
- Poor concentration
- Withdrawing socially
- Disappearing money and valuables

What is drug dependence?

There are degrees of drug dependence, ranging from mild dependency to compulsive drug use (often referred to as addiction). It is impossible to say how long or how often a person must use a drug before they become dependent, because this varies from person to person and some drugs are more addictive than others.

It is important to understand that the majority of people who take drugs do not become dependent.

Assess the risk

Gather knowledge about drugs and their effects so you can better understand the situation your family may be in. By understanding the effects, you can weigh up the risk to both the person using drugs and those around them.

How you can help

Family members are often well placed to help people make safer choices about drugs and to contact support services for further help.

If you suspect that a family member is using drugs, try to stay calm and think about how you are going to approach them. Calm, respectful and open communication is helpful for both parties. Verbal or physical confrontation with the person who is using drugs will worsen, not help, the situation. By expressing concern about a particular behaviour and not directly accusing your family member of drug use, you provide an opportunity to talk about what is happening in their life.

Resist the temptation to search their room for evidence of drugs as this is likely to do more harm than good: it will create an environment of suspicion and mistrust.

Define the problem

Identifying a drug problem is never easy. It is often a matter of personal perception. Many experts agree that a drug problem is not measured by how much, how many or what types of drugs a person uses, but by how the drug affects the person's life and the lives of those around them.

Share the problem

Talk to other family members about how they are prepared to be involved in dealing with the person's drug problem. This conversation can help set expectations and develop a network of support, so family members don't feel isolated and overwhelmed by the situation.

It is also important that the people around a person who uses drugs share their knowledge about the situation so that a consistent approach can be adopted. Consensus is vital: its absence can enable the person using drugs to take advantage of the people around them.

Choose an appropriate time to talk

If a person is caught at a time when they are unprepared, they may be more inclined to react defensively. Try to remove any distractions, such as phones. Avoid attempting an important discussion while the person is under the influence of drugs.

Explain the problem

Keep the communication open. One of the most important steps in bringing about change is to acknowledge what is going on and to explain how you feel to the person taking drugs.

A person using drugs needs to be ready to change before they stop using them. Talking to the person may not bring about instant change, but it's a start. The following suggestions may help:

- Explain how you feel and how their drug-taking is affecting you.

- Give concrete examples of their behaviour and how you feel about it.
- Try to remain calm and logical and stick to the point you wish to get across to them.
- Refuse to be drawn into an argument.
- Use 'I' statements instead of 'you' statements.

Try	Instead of
'I'm really worried about ...'	'You should ...' or 'You must ...'
'I feel ... when you ...'	'Your problem is ...'
'I am concerned that ...'	'You'd better ... or else ...'

Ask calm, respectful questions such as:

- 'What do you like about using drugs?'
- 'What don't you like?'
- 'Where does that leave you?'

Try not to force the issue. It's okay to leave the questions hanging there.

These suggestions may be easier said than done, but it is important for the person taking drugs to realise why their behaviour is a problem.

Listen

If your family member wants to tell you something about their situation, listen carefully without being judgemental.

Allow and encourage the person to speak in full sentences without interruption.

After they have finished speaking, repeat back to them what you have heard and understood so they can explain any misunderstandings.

Don't try to solve their problem. It is their problem. Real, long-term change will only occur when the person takes responsibility for their actions and deals with the consequences. You are not helping them (or yourself) by 'cleaning up' the mess they create.

Help them be responsible

It would be natural for you to try to protect your family member or friend from the problems caused by their drug use. But you aren't helping them (or yourself) by 'cleaning up' the mess they make.

For example, if they want you to pay a fine to keep them out of court, think about these questions:

- Who incurred the fine?
- If you pay it this time, will it stop them doing it again in future?
- Will you pay their next fine?

- What are you teaching them by paying the fine?

Your family member may learn something important by dealing with problems themselves.

Set boundaries

Communicate rules about what is and isn't acceptable behaviour in your home and the consequences of breaking the rules. Work out your limits, be clear and direct, and stick to what you say.

Find treatment options

There are many treatment and support options available. Different approaches work for different people at different times. Sometimes a person isn't ready to stop using drugs yet, but treatment options that focus on reducing the harms may be helpful.

Read more about treatment.

Acknowledge the small changes

It can be hard to stay positive when someone you love is struggling with the effects of drugs and all the issues that using them can cause. But try to acknowledge the positive steps made towards dealing with these challenges better, by both the person using drugs and yourself.

Coping with a bad reaction to a drug

Some drugs, such as alcohol and ice, can cause a person to become aggressive if they have a bad reaction. If this happens:

Stay calm

- Move slowly and try not to make too much eye contact.
- Give the person space and don't crowd them.
- Keep your voice low, calm and steady.
- Move children away.
- Make the area as safe as you can; remove dangerous objects.
- Don't ask too many questions. Say things like, 'I am not angry with you - I just want to make sure you are safe.'
- Try to use the person's name. For example, 'Jason, can you tell me what is going on for you?'

Reassure

- Be supportive. Tell them that they will be okay, and that what they're feeling will pass when the drug wears off.
- Help them calm down by encouraging them to move to a quiet place where they can rest.
- Listen to them and respond with calming comments. This isn't the time to argue.

Respond

If you are worried about anyone who has drunk alcohol or taken drugs call an ambulance by dialling triple zero (000). Ambulance officers don't need to involve the police.

If the person becomes violent or threatens to hurt themselves or someone else, move yourself and others to a safe place and call the police by dialling triple zero (000).

Get support for you and your family

Support for you and your family is very important during this difficult time. It can be particularly hard for you when the person using drugs is not ready to change their behaviour. Even when they do decide to change their behaviour, it can take a long time and there can be many setbacks along the way.

Remember that the person using drugs is the only person who can change their behaviour. What you can control is how you deal with the situation, so looking after yourself is a really important part of helping the person who is using drugs and helping your family.

There is no need to deal with drug issues alone. You could consider:

Talking with a friend: It may help to discuss the problem with a friend. Talking about how you feel may help clarify your thoughts and work out what you're going to do. It may just help to get things off your chest. It is easier to talk to someone you trust and are comfortable with. They may already be aware that something is wrong. They may have been in a similar situation themselves. People are usually very willing to help a friend, but they often have to be asked.

Talking with a professional: Talking with someone outside your daily life, such as a professional counsellor, can be a useful option. They have talked with many people in similar situations, and can help you to explore ways to deal with the problem. You will find professionals experienced in dealing with drug problems at your local community health centre or at an alcohol and drug treatment agency.

Joining a self-help group: Some people join self-help or support groups to share their thoughts and experiences with other people who are facing, or have faced, similar problems. There are several types of self-help groups for family and friends and each can have a different style. You might want to go to several different meetings before you settle on one that is right for you.

Further Information

The Druginfo website has information on:

- Help and support services
- Drug facts
- Treatment

Go to druginfo.adf.org.au

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Factsheet

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