

## HOW TO HELP A FRIEND WITH A DRINKING PROBLEM

There are many reasons why people choose to drink alcoholic beverages. Some people drink to enhance social interaction, to celebrate special events, to participate in religious ceremonies, or simply “for the taste of it.” These reasons are relatively healthy uses of alcoholic beverages. However, people who frequently use alcohol to cope with stress, frustration, anger or loneliness, or who need it to feel more comfortable in most social situations are vulnerable to alcohol use becoming a problem. Regularly drinking alcohol to “feel” a certain way (e.g. drunk, high, buzzed, or relaxed) may also lead to alcohol-related difficulties.

It is often difficult to determine if alcohol abuse is occurring. When the person is a friend or relative, it may be even more difficult to recognize the signs of problem drinking and to offer your help. The concern may not only be the amount of alcohol consumed, but changing behavior and relationships or poor performance at work or class grades.

If you believe that someone close to you is experiencing problems as a result of alcohol use, then information in this brochure may assist you in offering help. The guidelines will not enable you to offer professional counseling, but they should help you steer your friend or relative in the right direction.

### Basic Warning Signals

- Typically drinking to a state of intoxication
- Regularly drinking more than one intends to drink
- Regularly doing something under the influence of alcohol that would not be done otherwise
- Experiencing an increase in tolerance, being able to “hold your liquor”
- Missing work or classes due to hangovers
- Denying having a problem when approached about alcohol-related behaviors
- Suffering from chronic hangovers
- Drinking alone to escape from reality, boredom, or loneliness
- Relying on a drink to start the day
- Talking or thinking about alcohol most of the time
- Consistently choosing drinking over other activities
- Deciding to “cut down” or “dry out” for a time, then resuming drinking at the same level

### Preparing for Confrontation

When you find it necessary to confront a possible problem drinker, you should, above all, be well informed about alcohol and alcohol-related problems. Research the subject on your own, if necessary. The person will have greater respect for your efforts if you are confident and knowledgeable. Care about the person, show your concern to him or her. Be prepared for further involvement with the person, as this can be a long, difficult process. Seek support, even assistance, for yourself throughout this process.

### Confronting the Drinker

Be positive, communicate clearly and consistently, and, most importantly, be non-judgmental. The person needs to feel that there are solutions and alternatives to the problem.

Avoid arguing while the person is intoxicated. Discuss the behaviors later when the person is sober. Again, be non-judgmental, yet be specific about what has made you concerned. Let your friend know that his or her behavior is affecting you and that, as a result, you need to set some limits. Make firm resolutions about what kind of behaviors you will or will not tolerate. It may help to discuss the person’s behavior with other relatives or mutual friends. If they also sense a problem and are concerned, enlist their help in approaching the person. When similar messages are presented in a non-judgmental, supportive, hopeful way, it is harder for the individual to rationalize the behavior. When you initially confront someone, do not expect personal gratification. The person is likely to be defensive, may try to change the focus of your efforts, and resent your interference. They may even become angry. It is helpful to remind yourself that denial and defensiveness are part of the whole alcohol problem and not a personal reaction to you. Though gratitude is usually not a short-term result, if your friend hears you, it will make a major impact on his/her life.

Your friend may continue to drink. During this phase, remember the limits you set. Do not say one thing and do another; otherwise, the person may not take you or the problem seriously. Throughout the process, do not hesitate to call for help—another friend, a counselor or the police, if necessary.

## **Support for the Drinker**

If, at some point, your friend or relative agrees that drinking is creating personal problems for him or her, you may want to ask:

- What do you think you can do about the problem?
- What are you going to do about it?
- What support can I give you?

## **There Are Several Things You Can Do**

- Be a good role model.
- Remain supportive by recognizing the efforts he or she is making to limit or stop drinking.
- Offer to make contact with recovering alcoholics or non-drinking friends.
- Be prepared for some fluctuation; some efforts may go backward.
- Do not feel guilty if your friend fails; you are not responsible for another person's actions.
- Advise the person of the various community and campus resources.

If you want to learn more about alcohol, literature and alcohol professionals are available at the following resources. Feel free to call on them for assistance.

## **Resources**

Online Alcohol Assessment

<http://www.alcoholassessment.psu.edu/>

Center for Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS)

221 Ritenour Health Center

863-0395

University Health Services (OHPE)

237 Ritenour Health Center

863-0461

## **Clinic Appointments, Test Results and Advice Nurse**

Appointments can be made in person or by phone. If you are unable to keep your appointment, please call and cancel. Otherwise you will be charged for the visit. To schedule or cancel appointments, call: 863-0774

**For more information about health care issues, visit the UHS Web site at [www.sa.psu.edu/uhs](http://www.sa.psu.edu/uhs)**

This publication is available in alternative media on request.

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