



# How to Help a Friend With a Drinking Problem



AMERICAN  
COLLEGE  
HEALTH  
ASSOCIATION

If you think a friend has a drinking problem, it is important not to rationalize this feeling away or think it's none of your business. Many people with drinking problems say that talking with their friends helped them to seek professional help or gain better control of their drinking behaviors. Below is some practical advice to help you help your friend.

## Talking to Your Friend About Their Drinking

- Start by telling your friend you care about them and are concerned for their well-being. You may want to identify specific examples in which their drinking caused harm to themselves or someone around them. Ask your friend, in a non-judgmental manner, how they feel about their alcohol use.
- When talking with your friend, make sure to avoid blaming, lecturing, and verbally attacking them. A way to express your concern without sounding judgmental is to use "I" statements such as "I am concerned about you," or "I feel that your drinking is causing a problem because (list some of the ways in which you feel drinking has had a negative effect on your friend)."
- Know your own limits. Don't continue the discussion if you start getting impatient or angry. It is important your friend does not feel threatened. You may find that short, periodic discussions work best. Once you have raised the subject, it is possible your friend may respond defensively, deny having the problem, or disagree that he/she has a problem with alcohol.

## Dealing with Defensiveness

Make it clear to your friend that you dislike their alcohol-related behavior, not him or her as a person. If you drink, be honest about your own drinking and attempts to control it. Understand that your friend's defensiveness is based on fear of facing the problem and it isn't directed at you. Avoid drinking with someone who knows they have a problem with alcohol, as your participation may be viewed as approval.

## Dealing with Denial

If your discussions have no effect on your friend's drinking behavior, you may say how their drinking affects you. For example, you can say it is hard for you to enjoy going out together because you are afraid your friend will get sick, pass out, or get hurt.

## Dealing with Your Frustration

If your friend is defensive or in denial, you may believe that your efforts have been in vain. Letting your friend know that you are concerned is just the first step in a process — in other words, you are opening the door to future conversations and assistance should they eventually decide to change their drinking habits. If your personal frustration level is rising as a result of the situation, you should consider seeking some guidance and counseling from a health care professional. Keep in mind that changing behavior takes time — don't give up and try your best to hang in there with your friend.

## Dealing with Agreement

If at some point your friend agrees that drinking is creating personal problems and that he/she wants to change, you may want to:

- Praise your friend for critically evaluating their behavior.
- Ask them what they would like to do about their drinking and if they'd like your help.
- Let your friend know that you are there for them.
- Help your friend identify triggers to their alcohol use and strategies to prevent those triggers from occurring.
- Ask them what type of support they need.

You may also want to have some referrals handy when you talk with your friend, such campus resources, campus-based or local discussion groups (e.g., Alcoholics Anonymous, SMART Recovery), or the contact information for professional counseling services. Students may prefer on-campus services because they are typically free. Alcoholics Anonymous often has meetings that are free and open to anyone.

## Setting Limits

Until your friend acknowledges a problem with alcohol, you may need to set limits with him/her. For example, you might tell your friend that you are not going to hang out with them if they are drinking, that you don't want any drinking in your room or apartment, and that you don't want him/her showing up to see you after drinking. Whatever limits you establish, make sure you stick to them.

- Knowing and sticking to your limits is especially important if your friend is denying a drinking problem or making excuses. If you have had a drinking problem and attend self-help group meetings, consider inviting your friend along.
- Don't be manipulated into hiding or dumping alcohol or covering for your friend in front of family, dates, or other friends. Protecting or lying for him/her will only enable your friend to continue their destructive behavior.
- While it is important to try to help your friend with their problem, you must remember that you can't control your friend's actions. At some point, your responsibility ends. Don't feel guilty or personally responsible if your friend does not change their behavior or if he or she relapses.
- It's common among those struggling with addiction to experience setbacks with their recovery. Most learn from their relapses and consider recovery an ongoing process.

## Low Risk and Risky Drinking

Below is a general list of the drinking behaviors associated with low risk drinking, risky drinking, and alcohol dependence. While it is not necessary for a person to have every behavior to fit into a category, this list can give you a general idea of whether your friend has a problem and how severe it is.

### Low risk drinkers:

- Do not use alcohol below the legal drinking age.
- Drink slowly—no gulping, drinking games, or pregaming and no more than one drink per hour.
- Eat healthy food before and/or while drinking.
- Never use alcohol with medications or when medical conditions indicate no use is safe.
- Never drive while or after drinking.

### Risky drinkers:

- Use alcohol to become intoxicated.
- Use alcohol to solve a problem, relax, or manage emotions or situations.
- Experience personality changes—may become loud, angry, or violent, OR silent, remote, or reclusive.
- Drink when they should not—underage; before driving, going to class or work; or when medical conditions indicate no use is safe.
- Harm themselves, family, friends, and strangers.
- Keep drinking despite negative consequences.
- Have “blackouts”—cannot remember what they did while drinking although they may have appeared normal to people at the time.
- Change their academic, social, or work situation to accommodate alcohol use.
- Miss work or skip class as a result of hangovers or choosing to drink.

### Those with alcohol dependence:

- Spend a lot of time thinking about drinking and planning where and when to get their next drink.
- Keep bottles of alcohol hidden.
- Start drinking without conscious planning and lose awareness of the amount consumed.
- Deny drinking or the amount consumed.
- Often drink alone.
- Feel the need to drink before stressful situations.
- May have “blackouts”—cannot remember what they did while drinking although they may have appeared normal to people at the time.
- Miss work or skip class as a result of hangovers or choosing to drink.
- Have or cause major problems with the police, an employer, family, or friends.
- Minimize negative academic, health, legal, or social consequences to alcohol use.

## Progress, Not Perfection

In some cases, even though your friend agrees that there is a problem, he/she may be unable or unwilling to act as quickly or directly as you would like. Keep in mind that alcohol-related habits are hard to end or control. If your friend is struggling, try to:

- Remain supportive by recognizing the effort your friend puts into even small attempts to limit drinking.
- Create a series of small achievable goals that will help your friend build up a positive momentum of success.
- Help your friend make contact with other recovering problem drinkers.
- Encourage non-drinking behavior by planning activities not related to alcohol and by limiting your own drinking when you are with your friend

Helping a friend with a drinking problem is not easy, but it is very important! Know that you are not alone and there are many resources on your campus and/or in your community to help you and your friend. Make sure to take good care of yourself in the process.

### For More Information

**Alcohol: Looking Out for Your Friends**—from Stanford University  
<https://alcohol.stanford.edu/alcohol-drug-info/staying-safe/looking-out-your-friends>

**Alcoholics Anonymous**  
[www.aa.org](http://www.aa.org)

**Al-Anon/Alateen**—for families and friends of people with a drinking problem  
(888) 4AL-ANON (425-2666)  
[www.al-anon.alateen.org](http://www.al-anon.alateen.org)

**National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence**  
24-hour Hopeline: (800) NCA-CALL (622-2255)  
[www.ncadd.org](http://www.ncadd.org)

**Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration**  
(800) 662-HELP (4357); (800) 487-4889 (TDD);  
(877) 767-8432 (Español)  
[www.samhsa.gov/find-treatment](http://www.samhsa.gov/find-treatment)

**American College Health Association**  
(410) 859-1500 | [www.acha.org](http://www.acha.org)

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