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Friend misusing alcohol ^[1]

Dear Alice,

Last year, I became very good friends with a guy on my floor. He was a little out of the ordinary in the way he dressed, as well as in some of his opinions and habits. I had the feeling that he did drink more than he should, and he also did pot. I did not worry too much about it because it appeared to be more of a lifestyle choice than an addiction, and it did not cause him major troubles.

Unfortunately, he started to have academic problems. He did not do his work, missed classes, and eventually exams as well. I still did not relate these things to his alcohol and drug habits, and I hoped that once he got over the adjustment everyone needed to make in freshman year, he would be fine. Well, he wasn't. He did not come back to school this fall, and when I called him, I learned that he had gone through a lot that summer. He was diagnosed with depression and a cocaine addiction, put on Prozac, and sent to therapy. At that point, I thought that he was on the right track because he was also going to get a job and planning to take classes at a nearby college.

However, when he came to visit me a month later, he had already had two beers before he even came here and got more and more drunk as the evening progressed. I would not let him drive home, but he ignored my warnings and left anyway. I was very disturbed because a friend of his had just been in a drunk driving accident. I was very mad at him, told him clearly that I will always be his friend but prefer not to talk to him or see him if he showed up drunk again. He did not call for a while and neither did I. When he called me yesterday and I told him that I thought he should do something about his alcohol problem, he kept repeating his excuses, that he drinks because he is Irish, that he doesn't care if he dies early as long as he had fun in life, etc. On the other hand, he can't find a job and seems to be very depressed. I want to help him, but I don't know how. Any ideas?

— Concerned

Answer

Dear Concerned,

You're in a difficult, but common, situation. You're a friend of someone struggling with addiction. A great option is to be supportive, set boundaries, and stand by him — while also keeping tabs on your own well-being. Approaching this subject can be very difficult; it's good to let him know that you care but not to take on his problem. Ultimately, it's the responsibility of the person struggling with addiction to make changes and face the results of their actions.

It sounds like you've already got a good start by telling him you don't want to see him when he's drunk. It's wise to talk with him when you're both sober, and be clear and specific about what's going on for you and what you see is going on with him. By keeping the conversation simple (naming the most recent event) and by focusing on what you're observing, you may find it easier to initiate a conversation with your friend. If he doesn't want help or continues to deny that he has a problem, it isn't your responsibility to change his mind or behavior. He's the only one who can make the decision to change.

When you talk with him, consider these steps:

- You may want to start by telling him that you care about him and that you're concerned about how he's been acting.
- Then, you could tell him exactly what he's been doing that concerns you. For example, "You came to visit me after drinking, drank some more, and then drove home."
- You could then let him know how the behavior has affected your relationship and ask him how he feels about it or if he agrees that his behavior is concerning.
- Try to listen to his response, no matter what.
- Next, tell him what you'd like to see him do. Some suggestions could be, "Only come and visit me if you're going to be sober," or, "I'd like to see you go into rehab, or get some kind of professional help that'll work for you."
- Finally, tell him what you're willing and able to do to help him. This can range from simply being a good listener, to helping to arrange a meeting with a professional who can help.

If you feel comfortable, you could talk with him again if it doesn't work the first time (i.e., he doesn't respond or responds angrily). It often takes time and repetition for a person experiencing addiction to accept what you have to say. You can let him know that your door is open to discuss this at another time. When you have this conversation, ensuring that it takes place in private, in a safe environment, and when you're both sober can help increase the chances of conveying the seriousness of your concerns and a commitment to supporting your friend."

You may need help for yourself, if being supportive of your friend becomes too exhausting or time-consuming. If you don't take care of yourself, you can't help your friend. For more support, you could consider making an appointment with a mental health professional to further discuss this situation, how you might approach it, and how you can prioritize your well-being in the process.

Take care,

Alice!

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