

Help for friends who drink too much ^[1]

Dear Alice,

I have two friends who I think are drinking too much. I don't know what to do. They are very defensive should anyone say anything to them about their excessive habit, and a lot of our friends are giving up on them. This has become a daily thing and their schoolwork and friendships are all suffering. They are both 21; one recently broke up with his girlfriend of several years and the other has been single for a while and he hates it. I know that has a lot to do with it. Please suggest some non-intrusive ways to help them. I'm really at a loss.

Thank you,
A concerned friend

Answer

Dear A concerned friend,

It sounds like you really care about your friends and that you have their best interests at heart. It's not unusual for people to get defensive when friends approach them about excessive drinking, but it can feel less daunting if you come prepared. There are a number of different techniques that can be helpful. First, you may want to think about what's comfortable for you, how well you know your friends, and what you know has (or hasn't) been successful in the past.

As you prepare for the conversation, some ideas to consider include:

- **Approach each of your friends separately.** Although it might seem like their situations are similar, they may appreciate being treated as unique individuals.
- **Arrange to talk in a quiet, private environment when they're sober.** Scouting out a time and location that affords some privacy may help you and your friends to feel less self-conscious. That way, you can get down to the heart of the matter. Many prefer not to have these concerns pointed out to them in front of others. It's also a good idea to consider whether this is a time or place in which your friend(s) would be less inclined to drink.
- **Research resources.** You could find out if the counseling service at your school has drop-in hours or if there is a substance abuse prevention specialist available. You might also investigate whether there are any support groups on or near your campus. These services

may be helpful to your friends, and they might offer help as you prepare for your conversation. You might also consider practicing your conversation with a mental health professional, supportive friend, or family member ahead of time.

There are also some tips on having a discussion:

- **Be specific.** You could tell your friends what you've noticed about their behavior and what concerns you — you could also try using “I” statements. For example, you might say, "I've noticed that lately you've been drinking a lot. I care about you and I'm worried because it seems like it's having an effect on your schoolwork."
- **Identify their behavior, rather than criticizing their character.** You could say, "Your drinking seems to be getting in the way of our friendship," rather than, "You're a drunk and a real loser." They may not realize their behavior has an impact on others. One suggestion is to tell your friends how their excessive drinking has made you feel, how it's affecting your day-to-day life and your friendship — "I don't feel comfortable with the way you've been drinking lately. I find it hard to spend time with you because when you're drunk, you act like a different person."
- **Explore some of the underlying causes for their drinking.** People sometimes turn to substances when faced with extra stress [2], heartache, or fear. Your friends may need to find other ways of coping. Talking with you about their worries may be a first step. You could start the conversation with, "Hey, I know you've been under a lot of stress lately. What's going on?" or, "How have you been feeling since you and _____ broke up?"
- **Challenge your friends to think about their behavior.** They may be drinking out of habit. Or, maybe they're so overwhelmed with their troubles that they don't know what else to do. They may not have thought about why they're drinking so much until you ask.
- **Present options.** Your friends might not be ready to talk right away. But, if you've opened up the door, they might be more likely to look to you when they are ready to talk. You can offer specific assistance or simply make an open-ended offer to go with them to an appointment, to a meeting, provide resources, or just be there to support them.

You can be supportive and offer suggestions, but they have to be motivated from within, too. Ultimately, your friends are the only ones that can make these changes and you can't make them do anything they don't want to do. This can be a challenging situation, so it can be helpful to try to be sensitive to your own needs, too. You may want to set limits as to how much time and energy you're going to put into trying to help your friends. This may prevent you from becoming tired, resentful, or overwhelmed (you'll also be modeling some healthy self-care behavior).

For some more information about supporting others who are misusing substances and alternatives to substance use, check out the related Q&As.

Best of luck,

Alice!

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