How can I help my family member who struggles with alcohol? [1]

Dear Alice,

My granddad has been an alcoholic for ages — way before I was born. I am really worried about my granddad’s drinking. My father doesn't like me to see him when he is drunk, but that is kind of hard. What are the best groups for alcoholics? And most importantly, what should I do?

Thanks,
Needing A Lot of Help

Answer

Dear Needing A Lot of Help,

You're courageous to seek information about your family member’s drinking. For many people, recognizing and talking about alcoholism can be difficult. Your family may not like for you to see your granddad when he’s intoxicated because of the embarrassment and shame that is often connected with alcohol-related issues. There are a number of different strategies that you might consider in order to help your granddad (including groups that you can refer him to as well). While you consider these strategies, it might be helpful to remember that although you may offer help, your granddad is the one that has to choose to seek support. His drinking isn't your fault, and whether he decides to be sober is ultimately up to him.

So, where can you start? It might be helpful to begin by talking over your feelings and options with someone you trust — another family member, teacher, advisor, coach, or a mental health professional. They may be able to help you think about the relationship you have with your granddad. Have you two ever had a heart-to-heart talk or are you more distant? Do you see your granddad often or only once in a while? Do you ever spend time with him alone or always at large family gatherings? You could also think about his habits and your culture. How comfortable is he talking about sensitive issues? Has anyone brought up the topic of your granddad's drinking before? Taking time to consider and talking through these questions may help you narrow down how to proceed. Some options to consider may include:

- Try doing some research about the services available in your community. Your local place
of worship or community center may offer a schedule of Alcoholics Anonymous and other self-help and support programs. There are also programs for loved ones of those with a substance use disorder: Alateen has meetings all over for young people and Al-Anon is geared toward adults who have a family member or friend with a drinking problem.

- If you feel comfortable, you could try speaking with your granddad about these programs, or ask another trusted family member to speak with him for or with you. In either case, you could consider sitting down and talking about what you'd like to say to him before actually doing it. You may try to focus on your concerns about him and how his drinking affects you and your family. For example, you may say, "Granddad, you know I love you very much. When you drink, though, it's hard to spend time with you. I worry about your health and you act like a different person."

- Try to pick a quiet, private time to talk. Addressing the issue with your granddad in front of the rest of the family may make them mad, defensive, or embarrassed. Also, talking with him when he's sober may be helpful so that he can fully understand what you're saying. Perhaps you could arrange to go on a walk together or sit in a coffee shop where you can have some privacy.

- If talking doesn't seem like the right approach, you could try leaving some materials about recovery groups in visible places when you visit, or giving them to your granddad and explaining that you thought he might be interested.

If he decides to take steps to stop or change his alcohol use, you might want to know more about how to support him. You may want to check out Help for friends who drink too much in the Go Ask Alice! archives to learn more. For more information and resources in your area, you may contact some or all of the following organizations:

- SAMHSA (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration)
- National Association for Children of Alcoholics (NACoA)
- Phoenix House

Remember, you may tell your granddad how you feel about his drinking, your worries, and offer help, but there's no magic word to get him to stop. Even if you do speak with him, he may decide that he's not ready or doesn't want to change. If that's the case, he'll know that he can count on you if he's ready in the future. Attending a group for family members of alcoholics or talking with a mental health provider may help you to feel supported. While offering support can feel tough, your efforts may really support your family through difficult times.

Alice!
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Alcohol
Helping & Getting Help

Related questions

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How many recover from alcohol and drug abuse annually? [14]

Resources

Counseling and Psychological Services (CPS) (Morningside) [15]
Mental Health Services (CUIMC) [16]

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