I found white powder...Is my loved one doing cocaine? [1]

(1) Alice,

I found a white powder in my friend's car and I think it might be cocaine. I'm not sure if it is or not. I don't know if I should confront him with it or what I should do. I don't want to see my friend get hurt, but if I'm wrong, I don't want to falsely accuse him of something like this. How should I go about handling the situation?

(2) Dear Alice,

I am a first-year business student and have a little sister who is a junior. I think she is doing cocaine because I found some "paraphernalia" in her room last week. What can I do without damaging my relationship with her?

—Big brother

Answer

Dear Reader and Big Brother,

Talking with friends or family members about drug use can be tricky because opinions about drug use (including alcohol and tobacco) vary widely and are often strongly held. Especially with illegal drugs like cocaine, there could be a strong stigma or danger associated with acknowledging use.

In this situation, it seems like the bottom line is that you care about your friend or family member and want to support her/him. Talking about a possible drug problem is an expression of your concern. Though it might be perceived as an accusation, perhaps you can frame the discussion in a way that makes clear that you are not trying to find fault or be judgmental. It may also make the person feel more comfortable when talking about this if you assure her/him that the conversation will be completely confidential. Details will only be revealed to those who absolutely would need to know about it, such as health care providers or counselors if s/he decides to seek treatment.

Assuming what you found is cocaine (which may be a big assumption...do you have other reasons that support this assumption?), your friend or family member may have different
attitudes about drug use than you, which is her/his prerogative. Some people feel experimentation or occasional use is ok. Others believe any use of drugs is dangerous and unhealthy. It can be difficult to judge what is unhealthy or harmful for someone else. Substances like cocaine can be highly addictive. What starts off as something fun or occasional may turn into dependence. To read more about the side effects of this substance, check out Alice’s related Q&A on cocaine below.

You may want to keep in mind that if the person does have a problem, s/he may feel embarrassed or not want to admit to using drugs. By expressing your concern, you may want to let her or him know that s/he has options for seeking help if s/he chooses, even if s/he doesn't want to tell you. You might show support by giving a number for a local support group like Narcotics Anonymous [2] (NA). You can find more information about NA and a listing of meetings in different cities online. In the end, it is each person's responsibility to make choices; you can't choose for her/him. It may take time for someone with a problem to decide to ask for help.

It can be scary and upsetting if someone you care about has a drug problem. If you want to get support for yourself, you might consider talking with someone you trust, like a counselor, or someone from one of the resources listed above. Privacy and confidentiality are usually important to maintaining trust among friends, so you might want to think carefully about what kind of information you share and with whom you share it, if you are not talking with a professional.

Alice!

Related questions
Feeling 'dope sick' from cocaine use [5]
Reaching out for help with a drug addiction [6]

Resources
Counseling and Psychological Services (CPS) (Morningside) [7]
Mental Health Services (CUIMC) [8]
Published date: Jan 30, 1998
Last reviewed on: May 17, 2013
Go Ask Alice! is not an emergency or instant response service.

If you are in an urgent situation, please visit our Emergency page to view a list of 24 hour support services and hotlines.

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