

Having the conversation

Advice to help you
have a conversation
about alcohol
and drug use

ADF

Alcohol
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Foundation

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Family and friends of people who use alcohol and other drugs (AOD) often feel isolated, powerless, and confused.

Talking about it can feel overwhelming, and you may not know where to start.

In this resource you'll find some helpful tips on how to approach a conversation with your friend or family member about the impact of their alcohol and other drug use.¹

Discussing alcohol and other drugs is also a good opportunity to learn more about:

- what's going on for them
- your beliefs on alcohol and drug use
- different types of drugs and their effects
- what kind of support is available.



Why do people use alcohol and other drugs?

People use alcohol and other drugs for different reasons, and these can change throughout someone's life.

Some reasons might be:

- enjoyment
- relaxation
- curiosity
- peer pressure
- coping with mental or physical pain
- stress relief²

Finding out what's going on for them and why they might be using AOD, can help you understand and support them.

It can also help you understand why, when, where, and how they are using and provide you with the opportunity to discuss the potential risks and ways to reduce harm to stay safer.

Different drugs can affect people in different ways. For more information about different drugs and their effects, check out our [Drug Facts](#).

And, you can find out more about why people use AOD here: [Why do people use alcohol and other drugs?](#)



How can I tell if someone is using drugs?

It's not always obvious if someone is using alcohol or other drugs. Possible signs may include:

- changes in mood or behaviour
- changes to appetite, energy levels, or libido
- difficulty managing work, finances, and relationships.^{1,2}

But these don't necessarily mean a person is using alcohol and other drugs or experiencing [dependence](#). Instead, they may be:

- stressed
- experiencing problems with school or work
- experiencing mental ill health
- having difficulty sleeping.

And young people are likely to display some of these behaviours as a result of changes during adolescence.³

If you're concerned about someone's alcohol or drug use or think they're using substances, it's important to reach out and get some support on how to approach next steps with them.

This may include talking with your GP or other health professional, or calling peer-based helpline services that support families and friends concerned about someone's substance use.

We have some helpful links for you at [the end of this resource](#).



What does having a conversation look like?



Maintain trust

Maintaining trust and open dialogue is important when it comes to discussing substance use with your friend or family member.

While you might be worried, it's best to not breach their privacy or trust by searching their things for evidence of alcohol and other drug use or trying to find proof through their social media accounts, email or other communication, or financial records.

This can create an environment of mistrust and damage your opportunity to have honest conversations.⁴



Pick a time to talk

For a productive conversation, arrange a suitable time to talk. It can be helpful to pick a time and space that is:

- private
- safe
- quiet and relaxed
- free from interruptions
- less intimidating – like going for walk, sitting side-by-side, or while you're driving.

It's also important to pick a time when they aren't under the influence of alcohol and other drugs.



To set up your conversation time, try a general, friendly invitation, for example:

- "We haven't spent much time together recently, how do you feel about going for a drive?"
- "I've noticed you've been inside a lot lately, did you want to come for a walk and get some fresh air?"
- "I was hoping that you might have time for us to have a chat later on."⁴





Define the issue

Many experts agree that problems with alcohol and other drugs should not always be measured by how much, how many, or what types of drugs someone is using.⁵

A better measurement is how that use is affecting someone's life, and the lives of those around them.

Here are some examples of what you could ask to find out how drug use is affecting your friend or family member:

- "I'm worried about you; I've noticed you've been drinking a bit more recently. How's that been affecting you?"
- "I care about you and can see you haven't been going to school/uni/work as much. Why do you think that is?"
- "I've noticed a few changes in you lately, you seem to be down and not sleeping as much, what's going on for you?"⁴



Discussing alcohol and other drugs

The following general tips, can help you navigate a tricky conversation about AOD with someone you care about.

- Focus on behaviour, health, and wellbeing.
- Try to avoid judgement.
- Don't make accusations or exaggerate the situation.
- Avoid confronting or sensationalist language.
- Actively listen to their thoughts, feelings and opinions.
- Ask calm and respectful questions, using 'I' statements. For example: I think, I believe, I feel, I would like, etc.
- Ask them what role their alcohol or other drug use is playing in their life? This can help you understand what else might be going on for them.^{4,5}

Here are some examples to help guide you:

- "I feel worried about your drug use."
- "Thank you for sharing why you're using drugs, that helps me understand. I'm curious though, what are some of the things you don't like so much about drugs?"
- "It sounds like there's a lot going on for you, have you been using drugs and alcohol to help you cope?"
- "I care about you, so I'm wondering if there have been any times where you have been worried about your health or safety?"
- "It sounds like this has been going on for quite some time, have you ever talked to anyone else about this or reached out for support?"

Remember - everyone's experience with alcohol and other drugs is different.

What may work for one family or group dealing with alcohol or other drug use, may not work for others. For advice specific to your circumstances, it is important to talk to a professional.



What if they don't want to talk?

Remember that conversations about alcohol and other drugs can be ongoing. If they're not ready to talk right now you can let them know you're happy to talk another time, check in on them later, or offer to help them find someone else to talk to.⁶

This can look like:

- "I can see that you're upset and that's understandable, could we find another time to chat?"
- "It's ok if you're not ready to talk to me, would you like me to help you find someone you would feel more comfortable with?"

You can also check out [My friend or family member doesn't want help](#)



Establishing boundaries

What is a boundary?

Well, one definition is placing a limit or expectation on what is reasonable behaviour, without shaming or attacking the other person. Boundaries are necessary in all kinds of relationships.⁷

Establishing clear boundaries can:

- encourage accountability and respect
- help people to co-exist
- maintain healthy relationships
- manage conflict.

You could set clear, workable boundaries around what is and what is not OK in your home, space and relationship.

This could include establishing boundaries around having or using alcohol and other drugs in the home, or whether you want to give/lend them money.^{7,8} Each boundary will be unique to you, your situation, and your friend or family member.

When setting a boundary, it can help to think about:

- What is the issue or concern?
- What would you like to achieve with the boundary?
- Your motive:
 - is it a clear and thought-out response or an emotional response?
- How will you establish the boundary clearly?
- How will you try to be consistent and review the boundary?
- How will everyone in the home or group maintain the boundary?
- What will be the outcome of breaking the boundary?

Check out these resources on setting boundaries with friends and family

- [Boundaries](#) - Family Drug and Gambling Help, SHARC
- [Breakthrough for Families](#) - a range of resources, information, and support for families to help them navigate dependence
- [How do I set boundaries with my adult child who is experiencing problems with drugs or alcohol?](#) - counselling online (Turning Point).

You can also chat to a GP, counsellor, or a family and friends inclusive service on what boundaries might look like for you. There's a list of helpful services at [the end of this resource](#).

Looking after yourself

Taking care of yourself is just as important as helping others. We know this may not always be easy, especially when you're supporting someone else.

But getting support for yourself can help you be there for your friend or family member, when they need it most.

So, remember to put time aside for yourself. This might mean:

- staying connected with people who support you
- finding time in your day to do something you enjoy, such as reading, knitting, exercise, sports, or playing video games
- spending time on your personal life goals, such as your job or hobbies
- remembering that support is always available through other people you are close to, health professionals, counsellors and community.

There are also tools you can use to help soothe stress such as:

- watching a movie
- breathing/mindfulness exercises
- listening to music
- making and eating your favourite food
- going for a walk or run.

Directing energy toward your strengths and the things you enjoy, even for a few minutes a day, are great ways to find moments of joy, and support health and happiness.[†]



Getting help for a friend or family member

If your friend or family member is ready to get help for their AOD use, but you're not sure where to start, take a look at our [Seeking help](#) page.

There's a range of services that can support them to reduce or stop using alcohol and other drugs, or help them use in a safer way that reduces harm to them and people around them.

Remember, people's experiences with alcohol and other drugs are complex, and your friend or family member may not want, or feel ready, to reduce or stop.

While you may disagree with their alcohol or drug use, it's important to recognise that going to rehab or quitting completely are not the only possible goals.^{4,5}



Getting help for yourself

If your friend or family member's AOD use is impacting your life and relationships, consider talking to a professional like a psychologist, counsellor, or your GP.⁴

Peer support services such as telephone helplines, family education or support groups can also be helpful and safe places to discuss complex issues. These support services can help you find a community of people who are experiencing something similar. They can support you to build strategies, as an affected family member or friend, that can help with emotions and relationships.

If you're not sure where to start, take a look at some of the services on the next page.

Services

Alcohol and other drug support

- [National Alcohol and Other Drug Hotline](#) - this free and confidential hotline provides support and advice about alcohol and other drugs, including available treatment options and local services.
24 hours a day, 7 days a week
[1800 250 015](tel:1800250015)
- [Counselling Online](#) - a free and confidential online service that provides support to people across Australia affected by alcohol or drug use.
24 hours a day, 7 days a week
<https://www.counsellingonline.org.au/>

Family and friends

- [Family Drug and Gambling Help](#) – VIC, SA, TAS
24 hours a day, 7 days a week
[1300 660 068](tel:1300660068)
- [Family Drug Support](#) – NSW, ACT, NT, QLD
24 hours a day, 7 days a week
[1300 368 186](tel:1300368186)
- [Parent and Family Drug Support Line](#) – WA
24 hours a day, 7 days a week
[1800 653 203](tel:1800653203)
- [Youth Drugs and Alcohol Advice](#) – Victoria
9am - 8pm, Monday to Friday
[1800 458 685](tel:1800458685)

Path2Help

[Path2Help](#) is an intuitive online tool designed to help you find support and information tailored to the specific needs of your loved ones who use alcohol and other drugs.

Answering around 10 quick questions on the tool can provide you with the best matches for your alcohol or drug concerns. You'll also be linked with AOD education resources that can help you manage conflict and difficult conversations, find local alcohol and drug counselling and rehab services, drug facts information and more.

You don't need to know what you're looking for, Path2Help's search function does it all for you.



Further specialist support

- [1800 Respect](#) - 24/7 domestic, family and sexual violence counselling, information and support service. Quick exit of the website is available.
24 hours a day, 7 days a week
[1800 737 732](#)
- [Lifeline](#) - support for people experiencing emotional distress with 24/7 crisis and suicide prevention services.
24 hours a day, 7 days a week
[13 11 14](#)
- [Suicide Call Back Service](#) - 24/7 phone and online counselling to people affected by suicide.
24 hours a day, 7 days a week
[1300 659 467](#)
- [QLIFE](#) - anonymous and free LGBTIQ+ peer support and referral for people wanting to talk about sexuality, identity, gender, bodies, feelings or relationships.
3pm - midnight, 7 days a week
[1800 184 527](#)
- [13 Yarn](#) - 24/7 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander crisis support line.
24 hours a day, 7 days a week
[13 92 76](#)
- [Kids Helpline](#) - 24/7 online and phone counselling service for young people aged 5 to 25.
24 hours a day, 7 days a week
[1800 55 1800](#)
- [National Legal Aid](#) - helps you find legal advice by connecting you with your local state/territory-based legal aid services.
Typically, Monday - Friday, 9am - 5pm

For alcohol and other drug information you can chat to us by email

Drug Info email: druginfo@adf.org.au

Monday – Friday, 9am - 5pm



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