

Let's talk about...

Helping Someone Who Abuses Illegal Drugs

MENTAL ILLNESS DEMYSTIFIED

IT IS OFTEN DIFFICULT FOR PEOPLE WHO DO NOT HAVE A DRUG ADDICTION TO UNDERSTAND THE DRUG-SEEKING BEHAVIOUR OF THOSE WHO DO. DRUG ADDICTION IS NOW DESCRIBED BY EXPERTS AS A CHRONIC RELAPSING BRAIN DISEASE. BRAIN IMAGING SHOWS THAT DRUG ADDICTION SEVERELY ALTERS BRAIN AREAS CRITICAL TO DECISION-MAKING, LEARNING AND MEMORY, AND BEHAVIOUR CONTROL, WHICH MAY HELP TO EXPLAIN THE COMPULSIVE AND DESTRUCTIVE BEHAVIOUR OF ADDICTS.

Illegal drugs such as marijuana, cocaine, heroin, ecstasy, LSD, and crystal meth come in different shapes, sizes, and types. Each particular drug produces unique effects on the user. People use illegal drugs for many reasons: boredom, curiosity, to fit in. If a person is sad or upset, a drug can – temporarily – make the person feel better or forget about problems. But this escape lasts only until the drug wears off. People abuse drugs when they repeatedly take them to solve their problems or to make them feel 'normal.'

Drug use can be hard to change because initially the effects tend to be positive. People may feel good, have more confidence, and forget about problems. In contrast, the problems from use might not be obvious for some time. Once a person is addicted, it's very hard to stop taking drugs. Stopping can cause withdrawal symptoms, such as vomiting, sweating, and tremors. These sick feelings continue until the person's body gets adjusted to being drug free again.

SIGNS OF A PROBLEM

If you believe someone you care about may be abusing illicit drugs, the following are generally signs that a problem exists:

- frequent talk about the drug or drug experience
- makes plans around the use of the drug
- a growing 'pattern' of usage i.e. every weekend, holiday, etc.
- creates opportunities to use
- attempts to 'cut down' eventually fail
- makes promises to others to cut down, quit, etc.
- uses at inappropriate times or as a matter of routine

- uses in spite of negative consequences e.g. being sick, work problems, family difficulties, etc.
- maintaining a supply, hoarding, or keeping a secret supply
- gives a lot of reasons for using e.g. "I'm under stress," "I'm bored," "What's wrong with having fun?"
- lies about the amount being used or denies using at all
- an increase in tolerance so that it requires more of the drug to get the desired effect

HOW TO TALK WITH SOMEONE WHO ABUSES DRUGS

There is no magic formula for talking with a drug user, but there are some basic guidelines that will be more likely to result in a positive outcome:

- **Express care and concern.** It's difficult for most people to hear that their behaviour is inappropriate. Your attitude can help maintain the person's self-esteem and can make a genuine difference in the outcome. Demonstrate your care and concern by respecting the person's privacy and by using good "attending skills." Select a private location and ensure adequate time for the discussion.
- **Be descriptive and not judgmental.** Identify the specific observable behaviours that are of concern and how these behaviours make you feel. Describe the behaviours as objectively, clearly and concretely as you can. Avoid labeling the behaviour or making assumptions or accusations. Moralizing or judgmental behaviour almost always brings out defensive behaviour.
- **Offer specific help.** Let them know that help is readily available, they need only reach out for it. If they are covered by an EFAP, tell them how they can access it. If they are not, have information available for them on other community agencies or self-help groups. Offer support and encouragement, but remember the choice must be theirs.
- **Set boundaries.** Let the person know that you are more than willing to support their effort to get help in any way that you can, but also let them know what you are willing to do and what you are not willing to do in terms of your relationship with them. You may have to let them know that you are no longer willing to "cover for them" or "make excuses, etc."

Before you sit down to talk, think about your own level of comfort. For most people, having this type of discussion takes them outside of their comfort zone. The best way to deal with your own discomfort is to admit it to the person. Don't try to cover your discomfort by making small talk or joking as the drug user is less likely to take what you are saying seriously.



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