

## TEN STEPS TO AN INFORMAL INTERVENTION

You're worried about a friend's use of alcohol and/or other drugs. At this point, you don't want to get other people involved. You just want to talk to him or her about it. These 10 steps will show you how.

### 1. Learn All You Can About Chemical Dependency

It's important to understand that chemical dependency is a health issue rather than one of deficient morals, willpower or character.

According to the disease model for addiction, chemical dependency is a primary illness. This means that it comes with its own set of symptoms (e.g., blackouts, liver disease, brain damage, memory distortions). To restore health or arrest further deterioration, one must treat the addiction, and not just the symptoms.

Chemical dependency is a progressive illness. Continued use leads to greater physical, emotional, mental, and social impairment. The earlier the intervention, the better the chance of recovery, and the less destruction to the person's mind, body, and life.

Chemical dependency is a chronic illness. It cannot be cured, but abstinence from mind altering substances will arrest the progression. And, while some of the consequences to the body from use are irreversible (e.g., liver damage, brain damage), recovery can bring dramatic improvements in health (i.e., no matter how long someone has smoked, stopping has a dramatic positive effect on the lungs).

Chemical dependency is a fatal illness. Untreated, alcoholism and/or other addictions are likely to lead to death as the result of accidents, suicide, overdose, AIDS, liver or lung disease, cancer, or heart failure.

### 2. Get Help for Yourself

Caring about someone with a substance abuse problem is hard. You may feel lonely, scared, or confused. You want to help, but you worry about getting your friend in trouble or harming the relationship.

Don't shoulder the entire burden yourself. Talk to a counselor, teacher, coach, doctor, parent, sibling, or someone else you trust. You're not betraying your friend. You needn't mention his or her name, and you can ask the person to keep your conversation confidential.

Seek out a support group. Al-Anon and Alateen are for people who are concerned about somebody's drinking. The experience and understanding of those you will meet can be an invaluable support for dealing with a friend or relative's substance abuse.

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### 4. Plan What You're Going to Say

Give some thought ahead of time to your feelings about your friend. What do you like and respect about her? How has she helped or supported you in the past? What are the specific behaviors or stated attitudes that fuel your concern? What options exist for helping her?

### 5. Convey Your Affection and/or Respect

Let the person know how much she means to you, how important the relationship is to you. Talk about her fine qualities and all the times she has helped and supported you. This minimizes the possibility of anger or defensiveness on her part.

### 6. Express Your Concern

Be caring and non-judgmental:

- “You’re my best friend and I’m really worried about you.”
- “I’m afraid you’re going to hurt yourself.”
- “I worry that some of the things you’re doing could have harmful and irreversible consequences.”

### 7. Use Specific Examples

Provide examples of the worrisome behaviors you have observed. Avoid hearsay, sweeping generalizations, accusations, or blameful statements such as:

- “You’re destroying your life.”
- “You have a really big problem with drugs.”
- “You’re hurting everyone around you.”
- “You’re an addict.”

Statements such as these trigger anger and argument. Instead, describe the behaviors or incidents you have personally witnessed:

- “The last two times we went out you drank so much I had to get home by myself.”
- “You said really mean things to Amy and she left the party in tears.”
- “Last season you were the lead scorer, and this year you’re warming the bench.”

Talk about how the person’s behavior is affecting you and your relationship:

- “I miss spending time with you.”
- “I don’t like it when you ask me to lie to protect you.”
- “I’m embarrassed to invite you over to my house now.”

It’s hard to predict your friend’s reaction. She might burst into tears and agree with everything you’ve said. She might get angry, defend or deny her use, blame others, give excuses, or tell you to mind your own business. She might lash out at you as “someone who

should talk” considering all of “your problems.” This can be very hurtful. Try to see it as the illness talking, and not your friend.

Don’t argue or get angry. Your friend would rather debate the issue than look at her own behavior. Instead...

## 8. Offer to Help

From having done research, talked with an adult, or attended a support group, you will have learned the various options for helping your friend. Depending on the circumstances, offer to go with her to the school counselor, her parents or doctor, a 12-step meeting, and/or a local resource for evaluating and treating people with substance abuse problems. Instead of asking your friend if she is willing to get help, ask her which of these options she would like to use. Tell her that chemical dependency is not a problem she can solve alone.

Your friend may make excuses for why she doesn’t need to get help. She may promise to “quit” or “cut back” on her own. Know in advance how you will respond to this and any other objections to seeking help she is likely to make. You may tell her that your concern is so great that you cannot sit back and do nothing. Even if she’ll hate you for it, you’re going to talk to her parents or somebody at school. Or, if you feel that her use does not pose a serious threat to her or anyone else’s safety, you may simply tell her that you wanted to express your concern, and that you are ready to help in any way at any time. If she refuses to get help, you’ll need to...

## 9. Set Limits

Don’t be a co-conspirator in the problem. While lying for friends, covering up for them, or cleaning up after them may seem like acts of friendship, they are, in fact, ways to spare your friend from the discomfort and negative consequences that motivate change.

Establish limits so that you will no longer be in awkward or dangerous situations:

- “I’m not going to let you copy my homework.”
- “I only want to spend time with you when you’re sober.”
- “I’m not going to lie for you anymore.”

## 10. Don’t Expect Miracles

Your intervention may not appear to have “worked.” Don’t be discouraged. People rarely change long-standing behaviors based on one remark or conversation. But each expression of concern, added to the next, can lead to that point at which your friend is no longer able to ignore the truth.