

How to Talk to a Friend about Drinking or Drug use

Before you talk to your friend:

- Learn about drug and alcohol abuse. You can talk to any of the resources listed below without giving your friend's name.
- Prepare a list of specific problems that have occurred because of your friend's drinking or drug use. Keep these items as concrete as possible. "You're so antisocial when you drink" will not mean as much as, "When you were drunk, you made fun of me and were mean to me. You hurt me." Bring the list with you and keep the conversation focused.
- Choose a private location where you can talk without embarrassment or interruption. Your friend is more likely to hear you in a restaurant booth than at a large table in the Ratty. A talk in your room with the TV and music off will be more successful than one in your friend's room where he can easily create distractions while you talk.

How to talk to your friend:

- Talk to your friend when he or she is sober. The sooner you can arrange this after a bad episode, the better. Your message will have more impact while your friend is hung over than it will a week later.
- Restrict your comments to what you feel and what you have experienced of your friend's behavior. Express statements that cannot be disputed. Remarks like, "Everyone's disgusted with you," or, "Lily thinks you have a real problem," will probably lead to arguments about Lily's problems or who 'everyone' is. Avoid such generalizations.
- Convey your concern for your friend's well-being with specific statements. "I want to talk to you because I am worried about you," or "Our friendship means a lot to me. I don't like to see what's been happening."
- It is important to openly discuss the negative consequences of your friend's drinking or drug use. Use concrete examples from your list. "At the party I was left standing there while you threw up. The next day you were too hung over to write your paper. It makes me sad that these things are happening in your life."
- Emphasize the difference between sober behavior that you like and drinking behavior that you dislike. "You have the most wonderful sense of humor, but when you drink it turns into cruel sarcasm and you're not funny anymore. You're mean."
- Be sure to distinguish between the person and the behavior. "I think you're a great person, but the more marijuana you smoke, the less you seem to care about anything."
- Encourage your friend to consult with a professional to talk about his/her alcohol problem. Give them the resources listed below. You can offer to find out more about the resources or go with them to an appointment.
- If you have a friend or family member you really trust, talk to them about what you're seeing. Their involvement may help.

What NOT to do:

- Don't accuse or argue. If your friend gets angry or provokes you, remind yourself to remain calm and to stay focused on your goal -- to be helpful by honestly expressing your concerns. "I understand that you don't like some things I do, either; we can talk about them later. My point now is that when you drink, you're doing dangerous things."
- Don't lecture or moralize. Remain factual, listen, and be nonjudgmental. Remarks like, "You've been acting like a slut," will only elicit defensive anger. Instead say, "You've been hooking up with people you don't like and doing things you regret the next day."
- Don't give up. If your friend seems resistant, you can bring it up later or let them know you're there for them if they ever want to talk.