

[addiction](#)

## Helping Someone with a Drinking Problem

**Is someone you love drinking too much? Dealing with a loved one's alcohol abuse or alcoholism can be painful and challenging for the whole family, but there is help available.**



### **How alcohol abuse affects family and friends**

Alcohol abuse and addiction (also known as “alcohol use disorder”) doesn’t just affect the person drinking—it affects their families and loved ones, too. Watching a friend or family

member struggle with a drinking problem can be as heartbreakingly painful as it is frustrating. Your loved one may be disrupting family life by neglecting their responsibilities, getting into financial and legal difficulties, or mistreating or even abusing you and other family members.

Witnessing your loved one's drinking and the deterioration of your relationship can trigger many distressing emotions, including shame, fear, anger, and self-blame. Your loved one's addiction may even be so overwhelming that it seems easier to ignore it and pretend that nothing is wrong. But in the long run denying it will only bring more harm to you, your loved one with the problem, and the rest of your family.

It's important to remember that you're not alone in your struggle. Alcoholism and alcohol abuse affects millions of people, from every social class, race, background, and culture. But there is help available. While you can't do the hard work of overcoming addiction for your loved one, your patience, love, and support can play a crucial part in their long-term recovery. With these guidelines, you can help ease your loved one's suffering, preserve your own mental health and well-being, and restore calm and stability to your relationship and family life.

## **Recognizing the signs of a problem**

For many people, drinking is an ordinary part of life. In most places, it's legal and socially acceptable for an adult to enjoy an alcoholic drink. But since alcohol's effects vary so much from one person to another, it's not always easy to tell when a loved one's alcohol intake has crossed the line from responsible, social drinking to alcohol abuse. There's no specific amount that indicates someone has an alcohol use disorder. Rather, it's defined by how drinking affects your loved one's life.

In these difficult times of the global pandemic, economic uncertainty, and high unemployment, many people are drinking more than they used to in an attempt to relieve stress. While it's easy to understand, that doesn't make it less of a concern. Consuming alcohol to cope with stress, deal with difficulties, or to avoid feeling bad, may be a sign that your loved one's drinking has become a problem.

Your loved one may also have a drinking problem if they:

- Regularly neglect their responsibilities at home, work, or school because they're drinking or recovering from drinking.
- Often binge drink or drink more than they intended to.

- Lie about or try to cover up how much they're drinking.
- Black out or can't remember what they said or did when using alcohol.
- Continue drinking even when it's causing problems in their relationships with you and others.
- Use alcohol to [self-medicate a mental health problem](#) such as anxiety, depression, or bipolar disorder.

If you [recognize the warning signs](#) that your loved one has a problem with alcohol, the first step to helping them is to learn all you can about addiction and alcohol abuse. When you've researched all the different types of treatment and self-help options open to them, you'll be ready to talk to your loved about their drinking and offer the support and resources they need.

## How to talk to someone about their drinking

It's not easy to talk to someone about their drinking. You may be worried that if you bring up your concerns the person will get angry, defensive, lash out, or simply deny that they have a problem. In fact, these are all common reactions. But that's not a reason to avoid saying anything. Your loved one's drinking isn't likely to get better on its own; it's more likely to get worse until you speak up.

While it's important to be open and honest about your concerns, you need to remember that you cannot force someone to stop abusing alcohol. As much as you may want to, and as hard as it is to watch, you cannot make someone stop drinking. The choice is up to them. What you can do, though, is offer them steps they can take to [address their problem](#)—whether that's calling a helpline, talking to a doctor or counsellor, entering treatment, or going to a group meeting.

Tips for talking to someone about their drinking

Things that can HELP:

Tips for talking to someone about their drinking

- **Choose a time when your loved one is not drinking** and you're both calm and focused. Choose a place that's quiet and private, where you won't be interrupted—and turn off your phone and other devices to avoid distractions.
- **Express your concerns in a caring way.** Tell your loved one about the worries you have regarding their drinking and the effects it's having on their health, your relationship, and the family as a whole. Try to remain neutral and be compassionate rather than judge your loved one's behavior or try to shame them.
- **Encourage your loved one to open up** about the reasons why they're abusing alcohol. Are they stressed, bored, lonely, or anxious, for example? Many different factors could be contributing to their drinking, but to stay sober your loved one will need to address any underlying causes.
- **Consider staging a family meeting or an intervention** if you'd rather not go it alone. Again, everyone needs to come from a place of caring, rather than see this as an opportunity to bully, accuse, or vent their anger at the person with the drinking problem.

Things to AVOID:

- **Don't take any negative reactions personally.** It may take several attempts to begin a real conversation with your loved one about their drinking. Expect pushbacks and denial. Give the person time and space to come to terms with your concerns and start to see the problem for themselves.
- **Don't attempt to threaten, punish, bribe, or preach.** Avoid emotional appeals that only add to the problem drinker's feelings of guilt and increase their compulsion to drink. Offer advice, not ultimatums.
- **Don't cover up for your loved one** or make excuses for their behavior. Trying to shield them from their responsibilities will only prevent them from seeing the negative consequences of their drinking and could delay them deciding to get help for the problem.
- **Don't blame yourself.** You aren't to blame for your loved one's drinking problem, you aren't guilty or responsible for their behavior, and you can't make them change.

## Encouraging your loved one to get help

Don't expect your loved one to overcome a drinking problem alone. Even if they don't require medical supervision to withdraw safely, they'll still need support, guidance, and new coping skills to quit or cut back on their drinking.

You can encourage your friend or family member to get help by:

- Offering to accompany them to doctor appointments, group meetings, or counselling sessions.
- Sitting with them while they call a helpline for advice.

- Making a concrete plan with them, detailing what changes they'll make and how.

Your role doesn't end when your loved one agrees to seek help. Recovery is an ongoing process, requiring time and patience. Someone who abuses alcohol will not magically become a different person once they're sober. In fact, they'll face a host of new challenges. They'll have to find new ways of living without alcohol and they'll also have to tackle the problems that led to their alcohol abuse in the first place. But with your ongoing support and love, they can get there.

## To quit or cut down?

Of course, not everyone who drinks too much is an alcoholic. Depending on the level of your loved one's problem—and how much control they have over their drinking—they may be able to reduce their alcohol intake to a healthier level rather than quit altogether.

If your loved one's goal is to reduce their drinking, you can provide support by helping them set new limits and realistic ways of sticking to those limits. For example, if your loved one commits to at least two days each week when they won't drink at all, what will they do instead? On days they do allow themselves to drink, how will they adhere to healthy drinking limits—not more than one drink a day for a woman, two drinks a day for a man?

Help your loved one to write down their drinking goals and devise strategies for adhering to them. These could include no longer drinking at home, taking a break between drinks, avoiding bad influences, and pursuing new interests and social groups that don't revolve around drinking.

## Treatment options

The best [treatment option](#) for your loved one depends largely on the depth of their drinking problem, the stability of their living situation, and any other health issues they may be facing.

**Your loved one's primary care doctor** or GP can evaluate their drinking patterns, assess their overall health and any [co-occurring disorders](#), and provide treatment referrals. If appropriate, your loved one's doctor may even prescribe medication approved to help treat alcohol dependence.

**Attending a 12-step program or other support group** is one of the most common

treatment options for alcohol abuse and addiction. AA meetings and [similar groups](#) allow your loved one to spend time with others facing the same problems. As well as reducing their sense of isolation, your loved one can receive advice on staying sober and unburden themselves to others who understand their struggles firsthand. Studies suggest that the social connection provided by these groups can help your loved one build confidence in their own ability to avoid alcohol in social situations and support their sobriety.

**Behavioral treatments** include individual, group, and family therapy sessions. These can help your loved one identify the root causes of their alcohol use, repair damaged relationships, develop skills to stop or reduce their drinking, and learn how to deal with the drinking triggers that could cause them to relapse.

**Residential treatment** or “rehab” facilities provide intensive treatment for alcohol abuse or addiction. Your loved one resides at a special facility for 30 to 90 days and receives treatments such as detox, therapy, and medication.

## Supporting your loved one’s recovery

Recovery from alcoholism or a drinking problem can be a bumpy road. About half the people who complete alcohol abuse treatment for the first time stay alcohol-free, while the other half relapse and return to drinking at some point. It’s common for people to require treatment more than once to finally achieve sobriety. That means you’ll need plenty of patience when supporting your loved one’s recovery.

**Encourage your loved one to cultivate new interests.** When someone spends a lot of time drinking (and recovering from drinking), quitting or cutting down can leave a huge hole in their lives. Encourage your loved one to develop new hobbies and interests that don’t involve drinking. Look for things that can enrich and add meaning to their life, such as taking a class to learn something new; spending time in nature, hiking, camping, or fishing; [volunteering their time](#) for a cause that’s important to them; taking up a sport; joining a hobby club; or pursuing the arts by painting, writing, or visiting museums.

**Suggest social activities that don’t involve drinking.** While you can’t shelter your loved one from situations where alcohol is present, you can avoid drinking with or around the person. When you spend time together, try to suggest activities that don’t involve alcohol.

**Help the person address the problems that led to them drinking.** If your loved one drank because of boredom, anxiety, or loneliness, for example, those problems will still be present once they’re sober. Encourage the person to find healthier ways of [coping with life’s](#)

[problems and rebounding from setbacks](#) without leaning on alcohol.

**Don't enable the person.** Enabling differs from helping when you shield the person from the consequences of their drinking. You hide or dump bottles, take over their responsibilities, or offer financial assistance when they [lose their job](#) or get into legal trouble because of their drinking. Helping them means holding the person accountable for their behavior and letting them maintain their sense of importance and dignity.

**Help them find healthier ways to cope with stress.** Making a major life change by giving up or cutting down on alcohol can create stress. Similarly, heavy alcohol use is often an unhealthy means of managing stress. You can help your loved one find healthier ways to reduce their stress level by encouraging them to [exercise](#), confide in others, meditate, or adopt other [relaxation practices](#).

**Prepare for relapses but don't blame yourself.** Help your loved one plan how they're going to avoid triggers to drink, deal with alcohol cravings, and cope in social situations where there's pressure to drink. You can help your loved one find ways to distract themselves when cravings hit—by calling someone, going for a walk, or riding out the urge, for example—but ultimately only they are responsible for their sobriety. Setbacks are common in recovery. If your loved one relapses, it isn't your fault. All you can do is encourage the person to recommit to overcoming their drinking problem and support them as they try again. With your help, they will get there.

## Helping a teen who's abusing alcohol

[Teens today experiment with alcohol earlier and more often](#) than ever before. They're more likely to binge drink and more vulnerable to developing an alcohol use disorder than adults. This may be because the pleasure center of a teen's brain matures before their capacity to make sound decisions. Whatever the reason for their drinking, though, abusing alcohol can have lasting health effects for teens and often leads to [increased risky behavior](#), such as driving while impaired or having unprotected sex.

As a parent or guardian, it's normal to feel scared, angry, or confused if you discover your child is drinking. But it's important to remember that you still have a major impact on the choices that your child makes, especially during their preteen and early teen years.

**Remain calm** when confronting your teen, and only do so when everyone is sober. Explain your concerns and make it clear that your worry comes from a place of love. It's important that your teen feels you are supportive.

**Monitor your teen's activity.** Know where your teen goes and who they hang out with. Remove or lock away alcohol from your home and routinely check potential hiding places for alcohol. Explain to your teen that this lack of privacy is a consequence of having been caught using alcohol.

**Talk to your child about underlying issues.** Many teens turn to alcohol to relieve stress, cope with the pressures to fit in or succeed at school, [self-medicate other mental health issues](#), or to deal with major life changes, like a move or divorce. Talk to your child about what's going on in their life.

**Lay down rules and consequences.** Your teen should understand that drinking alcohol comes with specific consequences. But don't make hollow threats or set rules that you cannot enforce.

**Encourage other interests and social activities.** Expose your teen to healthy hobbies and activities, such as team sports, Scouts, and after-school clubs to discourage alcohol use.

**Get outside help.** You don't have to go it alone. Try seeking help from a sports coach, family doctor, [therapist](#), or counselor.

## Taking care of yourself

Dealing with a loved one's alcohol problem can feel like an emotional rollercoaster and take a heavy toll on your health, outlook, and wellbeing. It's vital that you stay safe, take care of your own health, and get the support you need.

**Don't try to face this on your own.** It's important to have people you can talk honestly and openly with about what you're going through. Turn to trusted friends, a support group, people in your faith community, or your [own therapist](#). A good place to start is by joining a group such as **Al-Anon**, a free peer support group for families dealing with a loved one's alcohol abuse. Listening to others facing the same challenges can serve as a tremendous source of comfort and support, and help you develop new tools for coping. **Alateen** is a similar support group specifically for teens who have a family member abusing alcohol.

**Don't neglect your own needs.** Try not to allow your loved one's behavior to dictate your own health and happiness. Schedule time into your day for relaxing, maintaining your own health, and doing the things you enjoy. Your loved one's recovery can be a long process, so you need to maintain a balance in your life. Keep up with work, appointments, and social plans.



**Set boundaries.** As much as you love the person with the drinking problem and as upsetting as it can be to watch them struggle with their addiction, there's only so much you can do. You can't monitor their behavior around the clock, make all their decisions for them, or allow their problems to take over your life. You are not your loved one's therapist or AA mentor, so don't try to take on those responsibilities. To [avoid burnout](#), set clear limits on what you're able to do.

**Manage stress.** Worrying and stressing about your loved one can take a toll on your mind and body, so find ways to [relieve the pressure](#). Eating right, exercising regularly, and sleeping well can all help to keep stress in check. You can also try one of HelpGuide's [guided audio meditations](#) to help you stay calm and focused as you make this challenging journey.

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Last updated: July 2021

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## **Support organizations, helplines and professional resources**

### **Support organizations**

Most of these organizations have worldwide chapters:

[Al-Anon and Alateen](#) - Support groups for friends and families of problem drinkers.

[Alcoholics Anonymous \(AA\)](#) - Learn more about AA's 12 steps and find a support meeting in your area.

[Women for Sobriety](#) - Organization dedicated to helping women overcome addictions.

[SMART Recovery](#) - Self-Management and Recovery Training (SMART) is a program that aims to achieve abstinence through self-directed change.

### **Helplines and professional resources**

**In the U.S.:** Call [SAMHSA's National Helpline](#) at 1-800-662-4357 or the [National Drug Helpline](#) at 844-289-0879, or search SAMHSA's [Behavioral Health Treatment Services Locator](#).

**UK:** Call Drinkline at 0300 123 1110, visit [Drinkaware](#), or [find NHS support services for](#)

# HelpGuide

[alcohol addiction](#).

**Canada:** Download [Finding Quality Addiction Care in Canada](#) for regional helplines and other resources.

**Australia:** Call the [Family Drug Helpline](#) at 1300 660 068, contact [Counselling Online](#), or find regional [Help and Support Services](#).