

# families & friends

affected by  
the drug or  
alcohol use of  
someone close



NSW Department of  
Community Services



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**Quay Connection** developed this booklet for the **NSW Health Centre for Drug and Alcohol**, in consultation with families and carers.

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## Is someone close to you using alcohol or other drugs?

If you're living with the alcohol or drug use of someone close, you probably have lots of questions.

Or maybe you're not sure how to cope.

This booklet contains information about how to look after yourself and support your family. It also gives you the facts about drug and alcohol use and drug dependence, and treatment options available to the drug-affected person.

Information about where to go for more support and help is also included.

It's common for families and friends affected by the alcohol or other drug use of someone close to go through a lot of stress and times when it's hard to cope.

Family members and friends react in different ways, at different times. They may feel sad, angry, anxious, fearful, guilty, resentful, withdrawn, stressed, disappointed, or helpless. All of these feelings are common.

If this sounds like you, **you are not alone**. Many relatives, friends and partners of people using alcohol or other drugs have had similar experiences.

**Don't be afraid to ask for help.** Drug and alcohol problems are difficult to deal with on your own. Getting support can help you to cope and continue to support the drug-affected person, if you decide to do so.

## I've just found out that someone close to me is using alcohol or other drugs. What can I do?

Checking up on or accusing your relative or friend can breach trust and create conflict.

Try to keep discussions open. **Encourage the person to talk.**

- **Don't jump to conclusions.** People sometimes worry that someone close to them is using alcohol or other drugs. The effects of drugs vary widely and there are no specific warning signs. There may be other reasons for changes in their behaviour.
- **Don't panic or overreact.** It may make it harder to find out what is going on and may also blow the issue out of proportion or cause the person to close up.
- **Get the facts.** Talk to your relative or friend about their alcohol or drug use.

- **Understand the drug.** Get the latest information on the drug they are using and its effects. This may help you to feel more prepared.
- **Keep communicating.** Be prepared to listen. Keep talking to them about everyday issues. Try to maintain your normal routines, as best you can.
- **Show concern.** Make sure they know how you feel about them and their alcohol or drug use.
- **Choose your moment.** It is difficult to talk with your relative or friend if they are intoxicated, or when you are angry or upset. Wait until they are sober and you feel ready, and you can ensure their safety and your own.

- ▶ **Get support.** Getting help in the form of support and advice may help you to cope and continue to support your relative or friend.
- ▶ **Look after yourself.** Don't forget to care for and look after yourself. Take time out. Do things that you enjoy - have coffee with a friend, go for a walk, take a bath - anything which helps you relax.
- ▶ **Try not to blame yourself.** People use alcohol and drugs for many reasons.
- ▶ **Remember other family members.** They may also be affected by the alcohol or drug use. They may also need support.
- ▶ **Recognise that they may need help.** You don't have to deal with the issue within the family. Getting treatment for the person can help speed up the process of recovery.
- ▶ **Remember, your safety is important.** You do not have to accept violent or dangerous behaviour.

## How could this happen to me and my family?

**Many families experience drug and alcohol problems. You are not alone.**

It is okay to talk about how you are feeling and seek help.

**Many families and friends say that when they get support, for example from a trusted friend, support group or professional, it helps them to cope, and they wish they had received help earlier.**

## Keep in mind:

- ▶ People take drugs and alcohol for lots of reasons – to have fun, to relax, to cope with stress, sadness or boredom.
- ▶ Your relative or friend may be experimenting. Not all drug use leads to dependence. However it can still create problems for the user and their family.
- ▶ Drug use and dependence are not always related to low self-esteem or family problems. Alcohol or drug use can happen in any family, regardless of how close you are.
- ▶ You don't have to go through this on your own. Get help. Remember support can help you to cope, and to continue to support the drug-affected person, if you choose to do so.

## I want to know more about alcohol and other drugs. Where can I find out more?

Drugs are substances that can change how your mind or body works.

- ▶ **Legal drugs** include alcohol and tobacco (if you are over 18), caffeine and medicines (if your name is on the prescription). There are often restrictions on their sale or use.
- ▶ **Illegal drugs** include cannabis (pot, marijuana, hash), ecstasy (E, eccy, pills), amphetamines (speed), LSD (acids, trips), cocaine and heroin. If you sell, use or carry illegal drugs you may be fined or jailed and get a criminal record.

Information about alcohol and other drugs and their impact is continually being updated. New drugs come onto the market all the time.

**So make sure you get the facts.**

Fact sheets about drugs and alcohol are available from your support worker.

For more information on drugs and alcohol and their effects you can also:

- ▶ Call the **Alcohol & Drug Information Service (ADIS)** information line on **02 9361 8000** or **1800 422 599** (regional).
- ▶ Visit your **local library**. Libraries have lots of up-to-date information about drugs and alcohol and can provide access to the Internet. Call **02 9273 1684** or visit **diayll.sl.nsw.gov.au**
- ▶ Visit **www.health.nsw.gov.au** for downloadable resources and information.

See **page 24** for more services.

**For emergencies – phone 000**

## I want my relative or friend to get help. What treatment options are available?

Once you realise that your relative or friend has a problem with alcohol or other drugs, you may want to get the person into treatment.

Often when people talk about treatment, they mean detoxification, which is controlled or supervised withdrawal from the drug or alcohol. Detoxification is only one step in the process. Treatment may involve:

- ▶ Using medicines or pharmacotherapies (like methadone, buprenorphine or naltrexone) to help the person withdraw from the drug or alcohol.
- ▶ Staying in a drug-free setting for a period of time (usually 1-6 months).
- ▶ Receiving help from a community based service while living at home.

- Counselling in groups or for individuals, or families.
- Self-help groups where people support each other to stay drug or alcohol free (including Alcoholics and Narcotics Anonymous).

Often treatment involves a combination of these approaches. No one approach is right for every person.

Sometimes the drug or alcohol affected person is not ready or willing to get help. For example, they may not believe or may not want to admit that there is a problem.

If you choose to continue supporting the person, don't forget your needs and the needs of others close to you. It's important that you look after yourself.

Remember, the drug or alcohol affected person will only seek help when they are ready to change.

**Treatment works, but it takes time. Relapse is very common. It can take a number of attempts before your relative or friend can successfully quit or cut down on their use.**

You may want the person to give up using completely. But sometimes they may cut down, or stop using the drug they were dependent on, but continue to use other substances.

Any step towards reducing dependence is a step in the right direction.

Treatment services are provided by government, community and private agencies, including your doctor.

Keep in mind that some treatment options may involve a fee - it depends on the type of service and who is running it.

For more information about treatment options or to arrange a referral:

- Call the **Alcohol & Drug Information Service (ADIS)** information line on: **02 9361 8000** or **1800 422 599** (regional).
- Contact the **Central Intake Service** in your local **Area Health Service**. See **page 27** for details.

## Myths and facts about treatment

- All my son needs to do is detox and he will be cured.  
**False.** Detoxification (detox) or withdrawal management is only one step in the process.
- I just have to get my daughter into rehabilitation and everything will be back to normal.  
**False.** It can take a number of attempts to quit, and relapse is common.
- Any treatment that my partner seeks, even if he drops out after a short time, is helping him get better.  
**True.** Every contact with the treatment system is a step in the right direction.
- It could take many visits to a rehab centre before my sister stops drinking.  
**True.** Drug or alcohol dependence is a 'chronic relapsing condition' and the person may make several attempts before they quit.

- Treatment may not stop my child from using marijuana again.  
**True.** Goals of treatment may include reducing harmful or risky behaviour or reducing and controlling use. Becoming drug or alcohol free is not the only goal.
- The only solution for my daughter is for her to stop taking drugs completely.  
**False.** Most people want their family member or friend to be drug free. However some people benefit from reducing or controlling their drug use – even though they may not be able to quit completely.  
**Pharmacotherapy maintenance** (like methadone or buprenorphine) can also be helpful for some people.

## In case of an emergency

If someone who has taken drugs or a combination of alcohol and other substances suddenly becomes ill, it is important to call an ambulance – **dial 000** – as soon as possible.

It is important to tell the operator what drug the person has taken, if you know. This will allow the paramedic to give them the appropriate treatment. For example, the operator may send a paramedic who can administer Narcan for heroin or other opiate overdoses.

## What about the impact on me and my family?

Dealing with the alcohol or other drug use of someone close to you can be very stressful and disruptive. You may even experience extreme periods of chaos and distress.

Your relative or friend's drug or alcohol use may have physical, emotional and mental effects on you and other family members.

You may feel guilt, self-blame, anger, rejection, disappointment, grief, denial, shame, powerlessness, anxiety and depression.

You may experience ill health as a result of living with the person's drug or alcohol use.

And conflict, neglect and financial difficulties may affect your family life.

Everyone reacts differently, at different times. However, some common responses include:

- ▶ Thinking you can deal with the problem and control it, on your own or within the family.
- ▶ Thinking you are responsible for 'fixing' the problem.
- ▶ Focusing on the drug-affected person at the expense of your own needs and the needs of others close to you.
- ▶ Believing the person has to hit 'rock bottom' before they will be ready to change.

People often put all their energy into supporting the person who is using alcohol or other drugs and trying to fix the problem.

By looking after yourself and others close to you, you will be better able to continue supporting your relative or friend.

## How are different family members affected?

Your relationship with the drug-affected person may also affect how you cope with their alcohol or drug use.

If your **child** is using drugs or alcohol, you may be worried about their safety and want to protect them at all costs. You may blame yourself for their behaviour, or cover up for them so that they don't have to take responsibility for their actions.

If your **brother** or **sister** is using drugs or alcohol, your response may depend on your relationship with them and your parents. You might feel sorry for your sibling and want to protect them. Or you may feel angry that your parents don't seem to care about you any more.

If one of your **parents** is using drugs or alcohol, you may be scared to admit that there

is a problem. You may even feel that it is up to you to fix or hide your parent's use.

If your **spouse** or **partner** is drug-affected you may be taking on more of their responsibilities and trying to keep your relationship and the family going. You may also cope by taking drugs or alcohol yourself, hiding their use and pretending everything is normal.

If you are caring for your **grandchildren** and they or your children are drug-affected you may find it difficult to understand their drug use. You may be overwhelmed by having to be a parent again and may need support and advice.

**Remember - no matter what relationship you have with the alcohol or other drug affected person, it's okay to talk about it and to get help.**

Everyone's situation is different. But no matter what is happening, you can look after yourself, and care for other family members.

- ▶ **Take your life back.** You need to look after yourself if you want to continue to care for your relative or friend.
- ▶ **Take time out for yourself.** This could mean spending time with your friends, going for a walk, reading a book or spending time on your own. No matter how small, it will make a difference to how you feel.
- ▶ **Get help and support.** Support services can help you and your relative or friend to cope.
- ▶ **Talk about the issue with your family or friends.** It's important that you don't go through this on your own. It also helps to be united and agree on what is and isn't okay.

- ▶ **Remember you can't fix the person.** Only they can take steps to cut down or stop their drug or alcohol use. If they don't admit that there is a problem, and are not ready to get help, you can still look after yourself and others close to you.
- ▶ **Talk to the person close to you** and tell them how their behaviour is making you feel. Let them know that it is not acceptable to behave badly – set some boundaries.
- ▶ **Realise that recovery may take time.** Even small steps are a positive sign.
- ▶ Often the decisions about what to do are difficult. **Only you can decide which choices you can best live with.**

## Useful contacts

**For information about alcohol and other drugs and their effects, contact:**

- Alcohol and Drug Information Service (ADIS) – 02 9361 8000** or **1800 422 599** (regional) – 24 hour, 7 day free confidential advice, information and referral service. They can also refer you to services providing treatment options.

**For information and support for family and friends, contact:**

- Al-Anon Family Groups** – including **Alateen 02 9279 3600** or **www.al-anon.org**. Free self-help network for families and friends affected by alcohol use of someone close. Alateen is a recovery program sponsored by Al-Anon members.
- Family Drug Support (FDS) – 1300 368 186** or **www.fds.org.au**. 24 hour, 7 day information, help and referral service

especially for families. FDS also offers self-help groups and programs for family members of drug users across NSW.

- Family and Carers Support Group, Ted Noffs Foundation – 02 9310 0133** or **www.noffs.org.au** (Sydney, Wollongong and Canberra, Coffs Harbour and Dubbo). Programs for parents or carers concerned about their son or daughter's drug use.
- Holyoake – 02 9904 2700** (Sydney), **02 4962 2871** (Newcastle). Offers programs for parents, family members and carers, and young people.
- Nar-Anon Family Group – 02 9418 8728**. Free self-help network for families and friends affected by the drug use of someone close.
- Salvation Army – 02 9331 6000** or **www.salvos.org.au**. Crisis and supported accommodation, youth support, recovery and dependence programs.

For financial, legal and mental health information, contact:

- ▀ **Centrelink** - 13 1021 or [www.centrelink.gov.au](http://www.centrelink.gov.au). Information about financial assistance and benefits.
- ▀ **Law Access NSW** - 1300 888 529 or [www.lawaccess.nsw.gov.au](http://www.lawaccess.nsw.gov.au). Legal and related services in New South Wales.
- ▀ **Mental Health Association of NSW Inc.** - 02 9816 5688, 1800 674 200 (regional) or [www.mentalhealth.asn.au](http://www.mentalhealth.asn.au). Free referral and information on mental health disorders.  
Mon, Tues, Thurs, Fri, 9:30am – 4:30pm;  
Wed 12:30-4:30pm.

For referral to treatment services, contact the Central Intake Service in your Area Health Service:

- ▀ Central Sydney 02 9515 6311
- ▀ Far West 02 8080 1556
- ▀ Greater Murray 1800 800 944
- ▀ Hunter 02 4923 2060
- ▀ Illawarra 1300 652 226
- ▀ Macquarie 1800 092 881  
02 6841 2360
- ▀ Mid North Coast 1300 662 263
- ▀ Mid West 1300 887 000
- ▀ New England 1300 660 059
- ▀ Northern Rivers 02 6620 7612
- ▀ North Sydney 1300 889 788
- ▀ Southern 1800 809 423

- ▶ South East Sydney 02 9391 8060
- ▶ South West Sydney 02 9616 8586
- ▶ Wentworth 02 4734 1333
- ▶ Western Sydney 02 9840 3355

**For emergencies – phone 000**

For an interpreter, ring the Translating and Interpreting Service (TIS) **13 1450**.  
A fee is charged for this service.

## Checklist for families and friends

- ▶ Take care of yourself.
- ▶ Know where to go for more help and support. Remember - it's okay to ask for help.
- ▶ Support other family members.
- ▶ Realise that you can't fix your relative or friend, and that they need to take steps to stop or cut down their use.
- ▶ Understand that recovery can be a long process and that relapse is common.
- ▶ Know where to get more information about available treatment options.
- ▶ Understand the treatment options that are available, and what each one offers.
- ▶ Know what to do in case of an emergency, such as an overdose.
- ▶ Understand the effects of alcohol and other drugs. If you need more information, ask a support worker.