

WHAT TO SAY?

Talking to Someone You Care About
When Their Drinking Seems to Be Causing Problems,
Or Perhaps Has Become One Itself

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MOTIVATION: I CARE

The most legitimate reason to address what may or may not be a drinking problem in someone you know is in response to your own gut. That is, if/when you feel the need to say something, it is ok, even important, to do so. Reason: avoiding the issue almost invariably leads additional anxiety with each succeeding problematic drinking episode.

Your own sense of emotional integrity, your own need to speak to the issue and to communicate to the individual that you've noticed and you care about them: these reasons are unto themselves necessary and sufficient.

You do not need to wait until she/he has a full-blown "drinking problem." It is easier and just as powerful, to address those problems in the individual's life that seem to you to be directly related to his/her drinking. Again, making clear that the reason you're doing so at all is not to label them, but because you've noticed and you care.

MESSAGE: I SEE, I FEEL

Be simple, specific, and concrete. Identify two or three instances, specific incidents, that clearly demonstrate the problem(s) that have you concerned.

Say what you saw: what was said, what was done, where it occurred, when it occurred, who else was there (ask this person to join you, if they are willing). Make it clear how, in your judgment, alcohol played a role in the events cited.

Say how you felt (angry, frustrated, hurt, embarrassed, scared, etc.). Do this in such a way as to be referring back to those emotions, not talking from them. For purposes of this conversation, the focus needs to stay on the person being confronted, and the tone needs -- as much as possible -- to stay calm and caring.

Do not try to be a diagnostician. It is a role that can back you into a corner, and cost you the connection you have with the individual you're confronting. When speaking to him/her, keep your observations to a level of "drinking seems to be associated with these problems" rather than "your drinking is a problem."

If the person denies that their drinking is causing them any problems, cite "the things you do when you drink" or "the things that happen to you when you drink are becoming a problem for (name the people involved) we're concerned that..."

GOAL: I EXPECT, I HOPE

To confront a problem without some means of response is ok, but not as effective as possible. For purposes of a peer-intervention, it is most helpful to suggest some manner of remedy for the person you're talking to: most often an appointment with a counselor. "I may be right or I may be way out in left field on this. It's not important that I'm right or wrong, I think it is important that you find out what's true for you. I'm willing to be wrong. But I'm not willing to leave this unsaid. Because right or wrong, I'm worried and I care."

In house expectations can be established too: within the realm of the shared living quarters, the relationship, or the situation. Do not set any bottom lines you cannot or will not uphold. In the long run, these only teach the drinker it's ok to drink even if it pisses you off a little --- nothing's ever really going to change.

SUCCESS: I LET GO

For the purposes of peer-intervention, a successful confrontation is one that has happened.

Unless there is a formal intervention with clinical guidance, a clearly defined bottom line, and treatment expectations, your peer-intervention will be a success because you had the courage to make it happen. Hold true to whatever expectations and bottom-lines you've established, and you've done all that you can.

It is possible, perhaps even likely, that the person you're talking to will become angry. Expect it, and you'll not be as damaged. If this is the case, know that "anger" is the natural next step when "denial" is broken through. If the individual becomes very angry, this is in and of itself important information. Respect the anger and, to the best of your ability, try not to personalize it. Let them know that you are not turning your back on them, nor are you attempting to instruct them on how to live their lives: you simply saw a situation that – as a friend who cares – you needed to address and you'll be available to them if they want to talk about it further.

If that still doesn't feel like enough, seek out the help of a counselor to determine what next step to take. Again, your need to do so is reason enough.