



When Your Friend Has a Drug or Alcohol Problem

A Guide for Gay and Bisexual Men

From the outside, addiction can seem hard to explain, frustrating, and contrary to all logic, especially when it's someone close to you with the problem. How long do you watch the harm being done before you step in? *How can I help when I don't even understand what's going on?*

Addiction is a chronic disease and, like others, can be more easily and successfully treated when recognized early. Although individuals do have to make the decision to quit for themselves, that doesn't mean you can't do anything to move the process along. Stubborn myths like, "You can't do anything unless an alcoholic wants to stop drinking" or "Drug addicts have to hit bottom before they want help" are common but not true. Friends and family members can play a major role in motivating loved ones to seek help.

When you're ready to help, you may be confused by all the conflicting advice that's out there. Let him hit bottom or get involved now? Tough love or unconditional love? A surprise intervention in the living room with all his friends or a gentle one-to-one over coffee? Which strategy is the right one?

Everyone has different needs, communication styles, reasons for using, and readiness for quitting. You know a lot about your friend's personality and may be able to choose the helping strategy that's most likely to work. You may have to try several different approaches before something clicks. This guide offers a place to start.

Understanding addiction

Before you toss on your superhero cape, it may help to recognize a few critical points about addiction. **First, no one ever thinks he will get addicted.** The crossover line between casual party use and dependence is sneaky and hard to predict. Most stumble over it quite unexpectedly and without even knowing it. Our society values will-power and self-reliance, and people generally think they can control their behaviors and manage the consequences. Try not to blame your friend for losing that control.

Second, alcohol and drugs cause immediate and profound changes in brain chemistry which result in powerful pleasure cravings and mood swings. At the same time, the brain may start losing its ability to process information and make decisions effectively. An addicted brain gets rewired to choose big doses of pleasure (or relief from pain) at the expense of other options. This may explain why your friend keeps getting drunk or having risky sex while high even after he swears he won't. A brain impacted

A brain impacted by chronic drug or alcohol use works very differently. So until he stops using, his thoughts, actions and decisions may seem irrational and, quite frankly, just plain stupid.

by chronic drug or alcohol use works **very** differently. So until he stops using, his thoughts, actions and decisions may seem irrational and, quite frankly, just plain stupid.

Addiction is both biology and psychology. While the cycle of withdrawal-craving-reward is certainly

driven by changes in brain chemistry, it is also shaped by deep and often difficult emotions. We often call these our "issues," and they can include anything from poor self-image to internalized homophobia to serious depression or anxiety disorders. Don't assume he can just "snap out" of his problems with the right prescription or a couple of therapy sessions.

Finally, the term "addict" is largely negative in our society. While 12-step philosophy insists that publicly declaring oneself to be an addict is a critical and even liberating step towards recovery, most people associate the term with failure, shame, criminal activity, and irresponsible self-neglect. It's difficult to take on a label like that. So don't insist that your friend does. To start, it's enough for him to simply acknowledge a problem. *What you call that problem*

