

Helping teens with alcohol and drug addictions

Source: Sunshine Coast Health Centre (2005)

In order to best help your child recover from alcohol or drug addiction, you need to understand the nature of addiction. Age is not a significant factor in determining who is a social drinker versus an alcoholic or a recreational drug user versus a person with a chemical dependency (drug addict). Further, the amount, type, or quality of a substance is not a determinant of whether someone has an addiction. People who only drink beer can be alcoholics, and there are many individuals who attend treatment because they have a chronic marijuana smoking addiction. Also, people do not have to progress on to “harder” substances in order to develop addictions. Finally, there are different types of drinking or drug-using patterns. Individuals may go for long periods of time without using mood-altering substances, while still having an alcohol or drug addiction. Others may use or drink only small amounts of mind-changing chemicals, but they are still addicted.

The difference between addiction and social drinking or drug use can be determined with the “Three C” Formula. People with addictions have difficulties with:

- **Control** - setting limits on how much they will use or drink
- **Compulsion** - placing a lot of value or meaning on their mood-altering substances (i.e., planning their days around how they will drink or use drugs).
- **Consequences** - having problems or negative consequences for repeated use of alcohol and/or drugs (i.e., hiding substances, telling lies, having arguments, suffering from financial or legal problems related to alcohol/drug use).

The “rock bottom” of drug addiction

Addictions are chronic, progressive, and potentially fatal if left untreated. As people’s addictions progress, they will suffer more and more negative consequences because of their decisions to continue abusing alcohol and/or drugs. The concept of people hitting their “rock bottom” or “bottoming out in their addictions” means that individuals start to experience problems relating to their addictions and, as a result, they decide to get treatment or help for their problems. Rock bottom is relative, and one person may decide to seek help after suffering from arguments with their family members because loved ones are no longer prepared to tolerate the drinking or drugging behavior. Another person may have a rock bottom in which he is prepared to change self-destructive drinking or drugging behaviors only after his first car accident.

This concept of “rock bottom” is difficult especially when it is applied to the experience of teens. Individuals in their late teens and early twenties often believe that they are invincible and are an exception to the rules in life. Teens may make excuses and insist that their drinking or drugging has not become a problem. Other teens may even rationalize that they are too young to have an alcohol or drug addiction

and cannot imagine surviving in their peer group who loves “the party scene” without using mood-altering substances.

The rules don't apply to me: Protecting your teen from the consequences of addiction

Remember that a major characteristic of alcohol or drug addiction is the progression into negative consequences related to the person's use of these substances. In other words, bad things start to happen when the individual uses mood-altering substances.

A pattern that occurs frequently with teens is that other family members protect the addicted individual from negative consequences. For example, a teen with a drug addiction may have had a health problem, learning disability, or social problem earlier in life. As a result, the family rallied around the teen and tried to help make these problems go away.

Likewise, parents may believe that their job is to “take away the pain” of their addicted children. Such children then learn that they can make poor or even self-destructive decisions in life because there will always be people there to bail them out of their problems. Over time, such children learn that rules in life do not apply to them.

One of the greatest gifts: Confronting the addiction

One of the greatest gifts that we can give people we love who have addictions is the respect of not ignoring the addiction. This can be scary because if we confront the person's addiction we may risk making them angry or they may emotionally withdraw from us. Other ways to confront an alcohol or drug addiction include:

- No longer making excuses for the person's addiction
- No longer providing money to the person especially when we know the money is going to drugs or alcohol
- Not allowing our homes to be destroyed or items to be pawned in order to support someone else's addiction
- Refusing to believe that we can monitor what they are doing and reduce harm by allowing drug or alcohol use at home
- Declaring our homes drug- and alcohol-free zones

Another gift we can give someone with an addiction is to tell him/her to get help. Often individuals feel lost in their addictions and the term “help” is really an abstract concept. People do not have to be motivated right away in order to benefit from treatment. Often once the drug or alcohol haze lifts, people can examine their lives with greater care and realize the true impact of their addictions.

Challenges for teens with drug and alcohol addictions

There are differences between teens who are coming to terms for the first time with having an alcohol or drug addiction versus those who have had experience dealing with negative consequences related to their addictions.

Teens will often:

- Bargain and find ways to convince themselves they can socially drink or mildly use drugs
- Feel invincible as if what typically happens to other people will not happen to them
- Experience strong peer pressure to remain in the “party scene” by using alcohol/drugs with their friends
- Feel like they have lost something or settled in life if they are no longer able to use alcohol/drugs
- Live in the present without really examining future consequences.
- Not have an identity outside of partying. As a result, they may feel overwhelmed having to become somebody who does not have an identity related to partying.

The result is that not all teens will be able to successfully complete an addiction treatment program. Also, not all teens will remain in a recovery lifestyle free from all mood-altering substances after attending rehab or a treatment program. This does not mean that youth cannot be successful in recovery. There are countless individuals who have recovered from alcohol and drug addictions during their early twenties.

Ways to support teens with addictions:

- Recognize that teens are responsible for their own decisions.
- Provide natural consequences for the young addicted person rather than trying to “protect” or “rescue” him/her.
- Use negative consequences as a “window of opportunity” to encourage the youth to enter treatment.
- Realize that the young addicted person may need to complete several attempts at treatment.
- Seek help for family members to prevent their own emotional “burnout.”