

If an alcoholic is unwilling to get help, what can you do about it?

This can be a challenge. An alcoholic can't be forced to get help except under certain circumstances, such as a violent incident that results in court-ordered treatment or medical emergency. But you don't have to wait for someone to "hit rock bottom" to act. Many alcoholism treatment specialists suggest the following steps to help an alcoholic get treatment.

1. Stop all "cover ups":

Family members often make excuses to others or try to protect the alcoholic from the results of his or her drinking. It is important to stop covering for the alcoholic so that he or she experiences the full consequences of drinking.

2. Time your intervention:

The best time to talk to the drinker is shortly after an alcohol-related problem has occurred--like a serious family argument or an accident. Choose a time when he or she is sober, both of you are fairly calm, and you have a chance to talk in private.

3. Be specific:

Tell the family member that you are worried about his or her drinking. Use examples of the ways in which the drinking has caused problems, including the most recent incident.

4. State the results:

Explain to the drinker what you will do if he or she doesn't go for help--not to punish the drinker, but to protect yourself from his or her problems. What you say may range from refusing to go with the person to any social activity where alcohol will be served, to moving out of the house. Do not make any threats you are not prepared to carry out.

5. Get help:

Gather information in advance about treatment options in your community. If the person is willing to get help, call immediately for an appointment with a treatment counselor. Offer to go with the family member on the first visit to a treatment program and/or an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting.

6. Call on a friend:

If the family member still refuses to get help, ask a friend to talk with him or her using the steps just described. A friend who is a recovering alcoholic may be particularly persuasive, but any person who is caring and nonjudgmental may help. The intervention of more than one person, more than one time, is often necessary to coax an alcoholic to seek help.

7. Find strength in numbers:

With the help of a health care professional, some families join with other relatives and friends to confront an alcoholic as a group. This approach should only be tried under the guidance of a health care professional who is experienced in this kind of group intervention.

8. Get support:

It is important to remember that you are not alone. Consider meeting with a local therapist specializing in alcoholism issues for insight and help. Support groups offered in most communities include Al-Anon, which holds regular meetings for spouses and other significant adults in an alcoholic's life, and Alateen, which is geared to children of alcoholics. These groups help family members understand that they are not responsible for an alcoholic's drinking and that they need to take steps to take care of themselves, regardless of whether the alcoholic family member chooses to get help.

Do you have to be an alcoholic to experience problems? No. Alcoholism is only one type of an alcohol problem. *Alcohol abuse* can be just as harmful. A person can abuse alcohol without actually being an alcoholic--that is, he or she may drink too much and too often but still not be dependent on alcohol.