

## Montclair State University

### Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS)

# If Someone Close to You Has a Problem with Alcohol or Drugs...

### Consider How People Change

Change is not about will power or strength of character. Changing any behavior, whether it is beginning an exercise program or stopping the use of alcohol or other drugs, is a process that involves more than simply doing something new or different.

Researchers Prochaska and DiClemente (1982) have identified six stages people go through when trying to make a change. The change process does not happen one step after another. Often, people will go back and forth between steps, learning new things each time that will eventually help them to make a permanent change.

#### The six stages of change are:

Precontemplation: The individual is not yet considering change or is unwilling or unable to change. Typically, someone in this stage will make comments such as:

“I don’t have a problem, I only drink on weekends.” “My RD thinks I have a drug problem, but she just doesn’t understand me.”

**To help people in this stage make some changes it is helpful to help these individuals become aware of their behavior and how it affects those around them.**

Contemplation: The individual acknowledges concern and is considering the possibility of change but is ambivalent and uncertain. Patient is not yet considering change or is unwilling or unable to change. Typically, someone in this stage will make comments such as:

"I've been on probation a lot and it's always for things I've done when high. I need to get straight before I really screw up." "I used to have fun when I drank, but not anymore. I need help, but I don't know if I can stop."

**To help someone in this stage it is helpful to assist him or her in getting information about their substance use and find out why they do the things they do. Initially, they may be confused when thinking about quitting. Some bad things are happening because of their substance use, but it is important to recognize that they also having fun too ... when it's not out of control.**

Helpful questions to ask someone at this stage are: Do you want to continue on a roller coaster, or would a smooth ride be nice for a change?

It's normal to be caught in the middle during this stage, and feel both ways about one's use. They like it and hate it at the same time.

Preparation: The individual is committed to and planning to make a change in the near future but is still considering what to do. Typically, someone in this stage will make comments such as:

"After tonight, I'm quitting." "Now that I'm not around my old friends as much, it's easier to try to stay straight."

As a friend you might notice that they might still be questioning if they really need to quit.

**To help during someone in this stage it is helpful to gently reinforce that they have started to meet new people and are trying to avoid old friends who don't want them to change. Remind them that getting back into sports, going back to school, and not constantly fighting with their parents is starting to look good now.**

Action: The individual is actively taking steps to change but has not yet reached a stable state. Typically, someone in this stage will make comments such as:

"I told my friends I don't want to use anymore. I thought they would give me a hard time - instead, they're happy I've decided to quit." "I've gone two weeks without drinking. I didn't think I'd ever be able to do it."

You will likely notice your friend starting to do different things and realizing that there is life outside of drinking and using. Activities that seemed boring before to them are now enjoyable.

Maintenance: The individual has achieved initial goals and is now working to maintain goals. Typically, someone in this stage will make comments such as:

“My RAs been nagging me all week. I really wanted to get drunk yesterday just to forget about her. Instead, I called a friend and we talked till I felt better. I’m glad I didn’t let my bad mood ruin my sobriety.” “I went to a party last weekend to see some old friends and ended up with a joint in my hand. It was hard, but I passed it to someone else. Good thing, that’s just not me anymore.”

A new attitude, a new outlook, and a new lifestyle are needed in order to stay straight and sober. If you’re friend is happy with what they are doing now, it’ll be a lot easier for him or her to stay away from alcohol and other drugs. On the other hand, if all he/she does is stop using or drinking without making any other changes, then they are more likely to slip back into old patterns.

### **What NOT to Do...**

- Avoid discussion and confrontations
- Don't attempt to punish, threaten, bribe, or preach
- Soften consequences by minimizing the importance of events.
- Make excuses, cover for, or even defend your loved one’s problem behaviors.
- Take responsibility for their behaviors
- Indirectly or rarely recommend change.

### **What You CAN DO...**

- Remain calm, unemotional, and factually and honestly in discuss their behavior and its day-to-day consequences.
- Address specific disruptive and distressing behaviors.
- Ensure that each negative behavior is followed by a consistent consequence.
- Insist that they take responsibility for their actions

- Let the person with the problem know that you are reading and learning about alcohol and other drug abuse, attending Al-Anon, Nar-Anon, Alateen, and other support groups.
- Discuss the situation with someone you trust -- someone from the clergy, a social worker, a counselor, a friend, or some individual who has experienced alcohol or other drug abuse personally or as a or as a family member.
- Encourage new interests and participate in leisure time activities that the person enjoys. Encourage them to see old healthy friends.
- Refuse to ride with anyone who's been drinking heavily or using other drugs.
- Be patient and live one day at a time. Dependency on alcohol and other drugs generally takes a long time to develop, and recovery does not occur overnight. Try to accept setbacks and relapses with calmness and understanding.
- Directly and frequently recommend behavior change.
- Express your concern about their use and how it is effecting your relationship with them.

Adapted from:

[Changing for Good by James O., Ph.D. Prochaska, John C. Norcross and Carlos C. Diclemente.](#)

Alberta Alcohol and Drug Abuse Commission, An Agency of the Government of Alberta, web site <http://www.zoot2.com/getitback/Change/>

*The information provided is for educational purposes only and in should not substitute consultation with a trained professional.*

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