How can I help my alcoholic family member? [1]

Dear Alice,

My granddad has been an alcoholic for ages ? way before I was born. I am really worried about my granddad's drinking. My father doesn't like me to see him when he is drunk, but that is kind of hard. What are the best groups for alcoholics? And most importantly, what should I do?

Thanks,
Needing A Lot of Help

Answer

Dear Needing A Lot of Help,

You're courageous to seek information about your family member's drinking and to think about how it's affecting you and your family. For many people, recognizing and talking about alcoholism is very difficult. In fact, your family may not like for you to see your grandfather when he is drunk because of the embarrassment and shame that is often connected with alcohol-related issues.

You may try a number of different strategies to help your family member. You may want to start by talking over your feelings and options with someone you trust ? another family member, teacher, coach, friend's parent, or a counselor. When thinking about what you'd like to do, remember that although you may offer help, your family member has to admit the problem and seek support on herself/himself. Your family member's drinking is not your fault, and whether success comes is ultimately up to your family member.

Your options may range from subtle hints about your concerns to outright requests to stop drinking. Which approaches you feel comfortable with, and which are the most sensible, will depend in part on your relationship with your family member. Have you two ever had a heart-to-heart talk or are you two more distant? Do you see your family member often or only once in a while? Do you ever spend time with your family member alone or always at large family gatherings? These are some situations to consider. Also think about your family's habits and your culture. How comfortable is your family talking about sensitive issues? Are they dealt with right out in the open or swept under the rug? Has anyone brought up the topic of your family member's drinking before?
Some options to try include:

- Try doing some research about the services available in your community. Your local YMCA, place of worship, or community center probably offer a schedule of Alcoholics Anonymous and other self-help and support programs for your family member of concern and for you and other family members. There are also programs for loved ones of alcoholics: Alateen has meetings all over for young people and Al-Anon for adults who have a family member or friend with a drinking problem.
- You may speak with your family member about these programs, or ask another trusted family member to speak with your family member of concern. Maybe an aunt, uncle, parent, brother, sister, or grandparent may be willing to try.
- In either case, consider sitting down and talking about what you'd like to say (or have your other family member say) to your family member before you actually do it. Try to focus on your concerns about her/him and how her/his drinking affects you and your family. For example, you may say something like, “Grandpa, you know I love you very much. When you drink, though, it's hard to spend time with you. I worry about your health and you act like a different person.”
- Try to pick a quiet, private time to talk. Addressing the issue with your family member in front of the rest of the family may make her/him mad, defensive, or embarrassed. Also, talking with your family member when she/he's sober is important. Perhaps you could arrange to go on a walk together or sit in a coffee shop where you two will have some privacy.
- If talking doesn't seem like the right thing, you could try leaving some materials in visible places when you visit, or giving them to your family member and explaining that you thought she/he might be interested.
- You may also offer to go with your family member to one of the alcohol-related groups or meetings. This may help to show how much you care for her/him and how much you think she/he needs help.

For more information and resources in your area, you may contact some or all of the following organizations:

- Alcohol Self-Assessment at Columbia [2]
- Addiction Illness: Medical Solutions (AI:MS at Columbia University Medical Center) [3]
- SAMHSA (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration) [4]
- AL-ANON Family Groups [5]
- Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) [6]
- National Association for Children of Alcoholics (NACoA) [7]
- Phoenix House [8]

Remember, you may tell your family member how you feel about the drinking problem, your worries, and offer help, but there's no magic wand. Attending a group for family members of alcoholics or talking with a counselor may help you to feel supported. Offering support may get tough, but your efforts may really support your family through difficult times.

Alice!
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