

HealthQuest

A workplace wellness update... from your EAP



When Alcoholism Hits Close to Home

Directly affecting about one in 20 North Americans, alcoholism is one of the most common addictions in North America, cutting across gender, age and ethnicity lines. And yet it's still very much a hidden disease, suffered in silence by countless families and wreaking havoc on the partners and children who have to live with an addicted loved one.

For those with an alcoholic family member, it can sometimes feel like an unpredictable roller coaster ride. But by admitting there is a problem in the first place, seeking out support and effectively dealing with the addicted loved one, you can ease some of the emotional turbulence that comes with living with an alcoholic.

Is there really a problem?

It's not always easy to know if loved ones are abusing alcohol. That's because they often feel ashamed about their drinking, and do whatever they can to cover it up. If you think someone in your family might be an alcoholic, ask yourself if he or she:

- Spends time almost exclusively with other heavy drinkers.
- Tries to hide drinking.
- Finds it difficult to speak about drinking.
- Tries to avoid situations where alcohol is not available.
- Justifies the drinking problem.
- Forgets things while or after drinking alcohol.
- Neglects personal care and proper dress.
- Creates a feeling of fear or tension in the household because of drinking.

If you answered yes to one or more of these signs, you may want to seek the support of a counsellor or healthcare professional to discuss coping strategies and how best to deal with the problem.

What effect can alcoholism have on me as a partner?

Dealing with the issue can also take its toll on the mate of an alcoholic. The shame and stress of having a partner with a drinking problem can leave you feeling guilty or depressed and can cause physical and psychological health problems.

Because alcoholics are so focused on their addiction, and because the alcohol causes them to lose self-control, sufferers become angry more quickly and are more likely to react violently when they're confronted. And while you might try to downplay the effects of the addiction because there's no physical violence, verbal abuse can be just as harmful to your emotional well-being.

If your partner is an alcoholic, you may try to deny the problem exists at all. It's only when things get out of control—when the drinking gets so severe you can no longer hide it—that you're forced to confront the alcoholic and face the difficult reality of the situation.

Dealing with an Alcoholic

Having an alcoholic family member is never easy. It means watching someone you care about fall deeper into an addiction, lose interest in life and become a danger to themselves or others. If you suspect alcoholism is affecting a family member, you can deal with the issue by:

•**Telling the sufferer how you feel.** When your loved one is sober, honestly discuss your worries and fears. If you're not sure exactly what to say, coaching from a counsellor or addiction specialist can help. While you may secretly hope that your words will be an instant 'wake up call' to your loved one, the reality might be quite different. Be prepared for anger and flat out denial of the problem. Remember: you can't control your loved one's actions or response. Avoid a confrontation when he or she has been drinking as you'll be negotiating with the addiction rather than your loved one.

•**Acknowledging the problem.** Be honest about how your loved one's addiction is affecting your life and family. Pretending the alcoholism doesn't exist won't really help anyone and will only lead to more fallout down the road.

•**Not enabling.** 'Covering up' issues by taking on the responsibilities that your partner can't or won't do lets your loved one 'get away' with bad decisions and poor behaviour without ever having to deal with the consequences of his or her actions.

•**Maintaining a sense of self.** Some partners get so caught up in covering up for the alcoholic and taking

care of family responsibilities that their identity becomes completely tied to ‘managing’ the situation and shouldering the blame. Remember: the alcoholism is not your fault and shouldn’t define your core being. Whether it’s joining a gym, meeting a friend for coffee or taking a class, look for ways to give yourself a regular emotional break from the relationship. Doing so can help you recharge and can give you the space you need to gain more perspective on the situation.

•**Getting help.** Make sure you have someone you can talk to about your feelings, such as a trusted friend or family member, or mental health professional. You can also look to groups, such as Al-Anon, that provide support to families and friends of alcoholics.

•**Staying safe.** If alcohol is causing someone in your family to behave violently towards themselves or others, remove yourself—as well as any children—from the situation and seek professional help immediately.

How does alcoholism affect children?

Having an alcoholic parent can be devastating for a child. Because kids naturally look up to their parents as guides and role models, they often feel they are the cause of the alcoholism. Whether it’s because they didn’t do well in a class at school, misbehaved, or didn’t make the soccer team, children often look for ways to pin a parent’s extreme drinking on their own personal shortcomings. This kind of rationalizing can obviously have a damaging effect on a kids’ confidence and self-esteem.

But it’s not just the drinking itself that causes problems. Mental—and sometimes even physical harm—go hand-in-hand with alcoholism so many children of alcoholics end up witnessing or becoming victims of domestic abuse or neglect.

This can make children of alcoholics more vulnerable to feelings of low self worth, as well as emotional and physical health problems. Children from alcoholic families are also three to four times more likely to suffer from alcohol or drug abuse than their peers.

Some kids, on the other hand, may seem to cope incredibly well by diving into school activities, academics or sports to buffer tension at home. But while the effects of an alcoholic parent may be less obvious for these high-functioning children, however they can also experience an intense need for perfection and control.

Supporting Children of Alcoholics

Because they’re exposed to such an unpredictable home life, it’s vital that children of an alcoholic parent get the

attention and support they need—even if they seem to be coping well. Protect kids from the worst side of a difficult situation by:

•**Talking about it:** Find out how children feel about the alcoholic family member, and let them know your concerns. Be honest and upfront and listen closely to their fears and wants. Support of a trained therapist and groups such as Alateen can also help kids and teens discuss their ups and downs and help them discover they’re not alone.

•**Explaining that alcoholism is an illness:** Let kids know the alcoholic is sick and cannot stop without outside help. Reassure them it’s not their fault and that they cannot “do something” to make a parent stop drinking.

•**Helping kids be kids.** Dealing with an alcoholic parent should never be the focus of a child’s life. Make sure kids are participating in other activities and social events away from the stresses of life. Children of alcoholics tend to cope better now and further down the line when they’re given the chance to ‘escape’ home tensions and focus on positive, fun outlets.

•**Removing children from dangerous situations** If you suspect the problem drinker is physically or emotionally abusive, then remove kids from the situation and get help immediately.

Coping with someone who has an addiction is never easy. By dealing with the situation openly and honestly and accepting what you can and can’t control, you and your family can make the best of this life challenge and get the support needed to cope with the realities of a loved one’s addiction.

If you have any questions about this topic, or if you wish to discuss a personal situation you may be experiencing, we invite you to contact your Employee Assistance Program (EAP). All contact between you and your EAP is completely confidential.

English Service: 1.800.387.4765
French Service: 1.800.361.5676

HealthQuest is produced four times a year for employees and their families. Any comments? E-mail us at info@warrenshepell.com

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