

When someone

you know has
a drug problem



Addictions Awareness Series

AADAC

How can you tell if someone has a problem with drugs?

It can be hard to tell if a person is abusing drugs. Changes in their behaviour may indicate a drug problem, but these changes may also be related to other problems such as depression, stress or other psychological/emotional problems. The following warning signs indicate that a friend or family member may have a drug problem:

- uses drugs on a regular basis
- only goes to parties where drugs are available
- undergoes personality changes when under the influence of drugs
- has trouble on the job or misses time from work because of drug use
- experiences relationship problems at home (with spouse, children, parents) because of drug use
- has money problems because of drug use
- gets into trouble with the law because of drug use
- avoids family/friends
- lies about drug use
- increases high-risk behaviour (e.g. shares needles, has unprotected sex)
- does not follow through with commitments/promises
- feels run-down, hopeless, depressed, suicidal

Does their drug problem affect you?

It is important to recognize when you are being affected by someone else's drug use. The following questions will help you determine if you are affected by someone's use of drugs:

- Do you worry about how much someone uses drugs?
- Do you have money problems because of someone's drug use?
- Do you lie to cover up for someone's drug use?
- Do you feel that if the drug user loved you enough he or she would stop using?
- Do you threaten to leave or hurt yourself in order to scare the person into quitting?
- Have you been embarrassed or hurt by a drug user?

If you answer "yes" to any of these questions then you are being affected by someone else's drug use.

How family/children are affected

When one member of a family is abusing drugs, all members of the family are affected. All family members, including the children, learn to adapt to meet the needs of the using parent. Family members must often assume responsibilities of the drug abuser to keep the family going, while the drug abuser becomes less involved in the family. Family members can quickly fall into the trap of becoming part of the drug abuser's support system, making it easier for the person to continue using. This trap includes covering up for the drug abuser's behavior, such as lying to other family members or the boss.

Family members often live in fear, real or imagined, never knowing how the drug abuser may react. They may also feel guilt, believing that if only they were a better partner (parent, son, daughter) the person would stop using drugs.

Children raised by a parent abusing drugs are often required to take on responsibilities far beyond their abilities or maturity. They may spend a lot of time and energy worrying about the parent using drugs, the non-using parent, and their siblings. The drug problem can turn into the "family secret" and the children learn not to talk about what is really going on at home. They may stop bringing friends home to avoid the embarrassment of having their friends see what is going on.

As a person's drug problem progresses, using becomes more important than family commitments. Children learn that they can't rely on their parents to follow through with promises. Some of these children will develop problems such as academic or social difficulties, depression or personality problems. Some of these children will grow up and develop substance abuse problems of their own.

What if the drug user won't get help?

You are not responsible for the person becoming dependent on drugs, nor can you make the person stop using. What you can do is change how you are dealing with the situation. You can start your own recovery process whether or not the drug abuser in your life stops using.

What can you do?

If someone close to you has a drug problem, you can take action. The following are steps you can take toward positive change:

- 1** Get information. Learn more about how someone develops a drug problem, and learn about the steps that can be taken during the recovery process. Reading this brochure is a start. There are other brochures, books and videos available through AADAC that will help you. Information is also available in libraries and bookstores.
- 2** Stop covering up for the drug abuser in your life. Sometimes people around a person abusing drugs attempt to cover up the problem. They think that if they make life easier for that person, he or she might stop using drugs. However, covering up for someone with a drug problem makes it easier for that person to keep using. You are helping the problem continue if you help someone hide their drug abuse.

- 3** Find someone to talk to about your situation. Talk honestly with a friend, another family member, a counsellor or support group. You may need support to help you work out your feelings and to help you decide what you can do to make your situation better.

- 4** Make changes. Identify the things you can do to make your situation better. The following are examples of positive changes you can make:

- Stop covering up the drug problem. Don't make excuses to family, friends and employers.
- Re-establish old friendships.
- Start an exercise program.
- Make sure you are eating and sleeping properly.
- Find a counsellor or support group.
- Do not accept blame for the drug user's behaviour, but do take responsibility for your own behaviour and the things you can change.

The choices you make to take care of yourself will help you, the rest of your family, and the person with the drug problem.

Where to get help

If you are concerned about the drug use of somebody you care about, help is available. AADAC offers a network of services across Alberta providing confidential, professional and caring support. These services include information sessions, individual counselling and group programs for family members.