

helping someone who has problems with alcohol

Alcohol is one of the most commonly used drugs in our society. It is legal and a depressant, impacting on the brain to affect mood, emotion, co-ordination, reaction times and our ability to assess situations.

Alcohol is used for many reasons: to enjoy the taste, to celebrate, to accompany food, to show hospitality, to feel more relaxed and have less inhibitions in social groups, to destress following a busy day or week at work or to forget about general worries and concerns and their accompanying negative emotions.

For the majority of people, alcohol consumption is not a problem. However, some people drink too much, and this can cause problems for the drinker and for his or her family members, carers and friends.

Link between alcohol misuse and mental health

Evidence suggests that there is a strong link between alcohol misuse and mental health problems. You may have heard of this called 'dual diagnosis' or 'comorbidity' but it is becoming more common to refer to people as having 'multiple' or 'complex' needs. People who have mental health problems may drink alcohol for very particular reasons - to try and cope with or hide away from the mental health problems and the life problems that this brings.

People who have alcohol problems and mental health problems are seen as a hard to treat group, but a group that is very vulnerable and therefore in need of help from both alcohol and mental health services. Often the symptoms of the alcohol misuse and the mental health problem will be very similar, making it hard for families, carers and professionals to identify and try to 'treat' the problem.

Impact of co-existing mental health and alcohol problems

It is important to remember that if your relative has a mental health problem, and an alcohol problem, that this could have a big impact on your life. Living with an alcohol problem can be a very difficult experience: there may be physical and psychological health problems to deal with, money problems, difficulties with work as well as your relationship with the person you care for. You may even find that your own alcohol consumption is a bit higher as you try to relax, cope etc. This is all very similar to the kinds of difficulties that you might experience in being a carer to someone with a mental health problem.

Caring for somebody with both problems can make it even harder. It can be hard for other members of the family as well. Traditionally, services have not tended

to offer help to family members, but this is slowly changing and there is help available.

Responding to your relative

- Use much the same kind of techniques and strategies for either or both problems together. (See notes on dealing with difficult behaviour)
- Try not to criticise, shout or be judgemental. Remember how hard it must be for your relative and how bad they must feel because of their problems. Acknowledge that there is a problem, but that it is possible to get help.
- Show your relative how much you care for them and want to try and help them. Letting them know that there is someone they can turn to for support, and who may be able to help them get further support, is very important.
- Having contingency plans in place ready to use in an emergency is vital and can often prevent a difficult situation from becoming a crisis.
- Try to find help that is appropriate for both you and your relative. You may need to get extra help in accessing treatment and support because of the higher level of need.

Useful contacts for support and advice

But, remember your own needs as well! National and local services that may be able to provide information/offer help to you and the person you are caring for.

Alcohol Concern is the national agency on alcohol misuse, and contains lots of helpful resources and links. This includes an online alcohol service directory, library and a series of Factsheets (including one called 'Alcohol and Mental Health').

Drinkline (National Alcohol Helpline) 0800 917 8282

Al-Anon, national number (will put you in touch locally) 020 7403 0888

Health Development Agency 020 7383 3833

See local contacts sheet for other numbers.

All numbers correct at time of going to press.

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