

Adolescents, Young Adults, and Addiction

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Navigating a child's addiction issues is one of the most difficult and painful tasks parents may face. Most families have been impacted by addiction or alcoholism in some way. While addiction often causes feelings of loneliness and isolation for everyone involved, one key to coping with and overcoming addiction is asking for help.

Addiction is a disease that drastically alters a person's personality and behavior. It causes people to continue to drink or use in spite of consequences (e.g., causing harm to self/others etc.). Addiction is considered a family disease because it causes immense strain and tension within the family unit.

Teens and young adults' prefrontal cortex (part of brain responsible for impulse control, judgement & decision-making) is still developing, making this age group susceptible to risk-taking and impulsive behaviors (e.g., experimenting with drugs). What starts as just experimentation, can end up snowballing into bigger problems for some young people. Science cannot predict exactly who will develop addiction issues, but there are risk-factors such as having a family history of addiction or having another mental health issue (e.g., anxiety or an eating disorder).

Tips for Parents:

1 Honesty, listening, & open lines of communication are key. Minimizing or making excuses are common characteristics of addiction. It can be painful to acknowledge that there is a problem; however, the problem will not get better unless it's faced head on.

2 Set boundaries/expectations and follow through with consequences. For example: *If you fail a drug test then you will have the car taken away for 2 weeks.*

3 Family members should practice self-care. Alcoholism and addiction can disrupt the daily lives of those around them. As much as possible, try to continue with living life.

4 Remember that you cannot "fix" this on your own. Someone else's addiction (even your child's) or destructive behaviors are not within your control. Your own behaviors/reactions (e.g., setting boundaries, enforcing consequences, & self-care etc.) are within your control.

5 Focus on the child's behaviors that are unacceptable, not the person. For example, "When you break curfew, I worry...". Rather than, "You make me worry...". This type of communication can help curb defensiveness or feelings of shame.

6 Encourage professional help. Have professional options ready and available in the event your loved one is ready to make a change. It's important not to force professional help- though if your child is still a minor or you are still supporting them then you may have some leverage with encouraging them in the direction of getting help.

7 Do research on addiction, recovery, and treatment options. The more knowledge you gain the more empowered you will feel about what you are facing and what options are available.