

Success may hide alcoholism

By MARILYN CHASE
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If someone you care about abuses alcohol or drugs, you've got plenty of company. About 43 percent of the U.S. population has a spouse or blood relative who is alcoholic, according to the National Center for Health Statistics.

Behind many a successful professional, there's a functioning alcoholic or addict who confines

suffering to a private realm. Indeed, highly intelligent and articulate people, adept at defending their addiction, are often the hardest to reach.

So what do you do? If you confront an alcoholic, you may torch an already volatile relationship. But if you remain silent, you may witness a slow self-destruction.

Education is key

First, educate yourself about the disease. Addiction is a medical problem, not a failure of willpower. Al-Anon, which has offices nationwide, offers education and support for families, just as Alcoholics Anonymous does for recovering drinkers.

Good timing is important in confronting an alcoholic. "Never confront a drunk. Wait until they're sober," says Jeffrey Goldsmith, a psychiatrist at the University of Cincinnati. And don't initiate a discussion when you're angry, he adds. Shouting matches solve nothing.

Just the facts

When you are ready for a confrontation, stick to the facts. Focus on the person's behavior, not on possible motives or moralizing.

Tell the person how his or her addiction affects you, but don't use emotions to manipulate. It's OK to say: "Drinking or drug use is hurting our relationship," or "I can't trust you." But avoid saying: "Do this for me, honey."

Expect denial and brace for a negative reaction. "You can encounter anything from a casual 'mind your own business' to outright hostility," says Elwood Bernas, a former alcoholic and ex-priest who works as a unit supervisor at Hazelden.

Don't wait for someone to bottom out, have an accident or contract a disease like cirrhosis, hepatitis or liver cancer. "We allow people to lose a lot of their lives because we get queasy about raising the issue. But you don't do the person any favors this way. Fact is, it's treatable. And treatment has a good chance of success," says John Allen of the National Institute of Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism.

When your own words fail, consider enlisting a professional interventionist.

In January, the National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence will begin offering a nationwide network with phone referrals to intervention specialists. Such intervention is especially critical if alcoholic episodes involve violence, experts say.



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