
How to Conduct a Family Meeting

Introduction

Including family meetings in your treatment of alcohol-using patients (or any psychiatric patients, for that matter) can help you better understand treatment challenges and therefore help achieve long-term sobriety. But it can be awkward to facilitate such meetings, especially if you haven't done many. This fact sheet presents some useful tips.

Meeting Structure and Planning

- *Decide whom to include.* Usually family meetings work best when they include the patient and one or two very close loved ones, such as a spouse/partner or first-degree relatives. Smaller meetings are more manageable.
- *Obtain permission.* If the meeting does not include the patient, have the patient sign a release of information form that explicitly allows a discussion of alcohol use issues.
- *Introduce the purpose of the meeting.* Say something like, "I think it's important to have this meeting with John and his family to make sure everyone is on the same page and to support John in his recovery."
- *Describe the ground rules.* Stick to the time limit. Keep things respectful—there should be no yelling, insults, blaming, or interrupting. Don't allow anyone to monopolize the conversation. Keep the meeting productive. Emphasize problem-solving, rather than problem-describing.

Meeting Content

- *Help the loved one with matters conducive to recovery.* This can include:
 - Assist with transportation to appointments
 - Support medication adherence (eg, taking disulfiram for alcohol use disorder)
 - Have family meals together as much as possible
 - Support a regular sleep/wake cycle
 - Support alternatives to alcohol, such as alternative activities (exercise, gardening, cooking, crafting, outdoor activities, music, etc.) and alternative beverages
 - Prevent and respond to relapse, such as by identifying typical signs of relapse and discussing the use of technology such as breathalyzers and ignition interlock devices. Remind family members that criticizing and blaming are less helpful than providing support for recovery.
- *Don't help the loved one with matters that are not conducive to recovery.* For example:
 - Don't give them money if they have repeatedly spent it on using
 - Don't use alcohol around them
 - Don't turn a blind eye to obvious red flags of relapse
- *Help the loved one take care of themselves.*
 - If available in your community, recommend support groups such as Al-Anon/Alateen and SMART Recovery Family & Friends
 - Refer meeting attendees to the following online resources:
 - National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA) Alcohol Treatment Navigator (<https://alcoholtreatment.niaaa.nih.gov>)
 - National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) section for patients and families (<https://nida.nih.gov/nidamed-medical-health-professionals/for-your-patients>)
 - Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) Resources for Families Coping With Mental Health and Substance Use Disorders (<https://www.samhsa.gov/families>)
 - Recommend the book *Get Your Loved One Sober: Alternatives to Nagging, Pleading, and Threatening* by Robert Meyers and Brenda Wolfe