
How to Help Families of Alcohol Users: An Overview

Introduction

Families or friends of patients may ask you for advice about what they can do to help their loved one with alcohol use disorder (AUD). Some will be quite desperate for help, and may themselves be suffering from psychiatric illness—possibly aggravated by the patient’s behaviors. In this fact sheet we give you an overview of the different things you can suggest for family members. Some of these options are covered in more detail in individual fact sheets.

- **Family meetings (see “How to Conduct a Family Meeting”)**

- What they are: Informal meetings that you conduct in the office, where you discuss the patient’s alcohol use issues and how the family can be helpful
- Pros:
 - Meetings are easy to implement
 - You can learn more about your patient in a family meeting than in individual sessions
 - You have direct input into the family’s involvement with treatment
- Cons:
 - Meetings can interfere with your therapeutic alliance if the patient perceives that you’re taking the family’s “side”
 - Things can get heated—you can’t predict what family members will say and what their agendas may be

- **Al-Anon/Alateen (see “Al-Anon/Alateen” fact sheet)**

- What they are: 12-step groups for families/friends of people with AUD
- Pros:
 - Group meetings are often co-located with other 12-step meetings so the patient and family/friends can attend different meetings at the same time in the same location
 - Loved ones can receive support regardless of whether the patient is interested in quitting drinking
- Cons:
 - Not everyone resonates with the 12-step model
 - Every individual meeting is a little bit different in terms of group dynamic, so families/friends may need to try various meetings to find a good fit

- **Community reinforcement and family training (CRAFT)**

- What it is: A therapeutic technique in which a therapist works with the family to optimize the home environment and facilitate sobriety or entry into treatment
- Pros:
 - Family members obtain tools to facilitate reduction in drinking, such as communication, setting limits, and establishing appropriate consequences
 - Studies have shown that CRAFT is more effective in promoting sobriety than techniques such as 12-step facilitation therapy
- Cons:
 - Professionals skilled in this technique can be difficult to find

- **Intervention (see “Staging Interventions for Alcohol Use Disorder”)**

- What it is: A family meeting, usually facilitated by a professional interventionist, where the individual with AUD is gently confronted and usually given an ultimatum to encourage them to enter treatment
- Pros:
 - An intervention makes it clear to the individual that others are very concerned about their drinking
 - The patient may be convinced to undergo rapid entry into a treatment program
- Cons:
 - An intervention requires significant commitment from attendees (friends, family members, employers, etc.)
 - Attendees must hold at least one rehearsal/planning meeting before the intervention
 - Outcomes are variable—the patient may refuse treatment despite family pressure or ultimatums
 - The interventionist may have a financial incentive to get the patient into a specific residential treatment program