

Psychiatrist Michael Yasinski M.D. discusses a non-confrontational approach to addressing an alcoholic.



Confronting a friend or family member about their drinking problem is a daunting task but with the right approach, the process can be less painful and very effective. The thought of jeopardizing a relationship in this scenario makes people reluctant to confront their friends or family members despite being concerned for their well-being. However, utilizing a non-confrontational approach can prevent this and can actually foster an even stronger relationship.

Typically, people imagine a formal intervention as the only option to deal with this situation. While they can be effective, they are not practical for the majority of people. Fortunately, there is an easier yet very effective approach that anyone can take to address this touchy topic with their loved ones.

The first step involves determining whether or not someone has insight into their addiction. This will determine the aggressiveness of your approach. If they are in denial, they require a softer, more subtle approach. Regardless of their level of insight, the key is to approach them in a non-confrontational manner that is supportive rather than judgmental or critical. An overly aggressive confrontation tends to put people on the defense, and they immediately resist anything you may say. This makes planting the necessary seeds of sobriety virtually impossible. How, then, do you successfully approach them?

Although often tempting, do not confront a person while they are intoxicated. Even though this is often when their most problematic behavior emerges, it is also the time they are least open to hearing about sobriety. Equally important is to minimize the perceived threat and have the conversation in private.

Before actually confronting someone, it is crucial to understand what motivates them in their life. Successful career aspirations? Money? Physical health? The reality is that nobody will stop drinking because you want them to stop. People are inherently selfish so putting sobriety into a context that appeals to their selfish motivations is the most effective way to motivate them.

Another effective approach involves relating your own situation with theirs, if possible. Without discussing their addiction, talking about the benefits of sobriety in the context of your own life can spark their interest and plant the seeds of sobriety. This interest can subsequently be cultivated by continuing to set an example of how sobriety has allowed you to excel in life.

All of these approaches require patience and time. Understandably, this is frustrating. However, using a supportive, non-confrontational approach where you consistently lead by example, cultivate subtly planted seeds of sobriety and relate sobriety to one's selfish motivations offers the best chance at achieving your goal while maintaining a healthy relationship.

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