

How To: *Approach a student struggling with alcohol/substance problems?*

✦ College drinking and substance use is a public health issue for the Nation. The first step to addressing this problem is to understand its prevalence and recognize it. The following information, although brief, will help you do both.

✦ **Understanding the issue and its impact(s):**

- High-risk drinking includes:
 1. Underage drinking
 2. Drinking and driving or other activities where use is dangerous
 3. Drinking when health conditions or medications make use dangerous
 4. Binge drinking; that is, 5 drinks per occasion for males and 4 for females
- Annual Impact(s):
 1. Over 1,400 students ages 18-24 die from alcohol-related injuries
 2. 500,000 students ages 18-24 are unintentionally injured, under the influence
 3. 600,000 students ages 18-24 are assaulted by another student who has been drinking
 4. About 25 percent of college students report academic consequences because of use
 5. More than 150,000 students develop an alcohol-related health problem
 6. 2.1 million students between the ages of 18-24 drove under the influence of alcohol last year
 7. 31 percent of college students met criteria for a diagnosis of alcohol abuse and 6 percent for alcohol dependence

✦ **How to identify a problem or at-risk drinkers/substance users:**

- Failure to fulfill school responsibilities
 1. Poor attendance, low grades, and/or recent disciplinary action
- Drinking in situations that are physically dangerous (i.e., driving)
- Recurring alcohol/drug-related legal problems
- Conflict with friends, roommates
- Continued use despite relationship problems
- Mood changes
 1. Temper flare-ups, irritability, and defensiveness
- Physical or mental issues
 1. Memory lapses, poor concentration, bloodshot eyes, lack of coordination, slurred speech, sleep disturbance

✦ **How you can help:**

- It may seem like common sense – take the time to talk to the student
- A simple model for talking to a person about a sensitive topic (i.e., drinking/drug problem) involves statements like: “I care,” “I see,” “I feel,” LISTEN, “I want,” “I will.”

1. I care – Make statements that help set the tone and describe your relationship with the student. Saying that you care helps the student be more willing to accept the observations you are going to share.
 - Example, “As your RA, I care for your health and safety...”
2. I see – Include specific, observable behaviors and avoid making judgmental statements.
 - Example, “I have noticed you have been drinking 5 nights per week for the past 2 weeks.”
3. I feel – Make statements of how these behaviors concern you and why you want to raise the issue.
 - Example, “I feel this might start to affect your ability to attend class regularly or cause some health problems.”
4. Listen – An important step in this process is allowing the person to react and share information. If he gets angry or provokes you, remain calm and focused. Remain factual and non-judgmental.
5. I want – Try to get the person to agree to some form of positive action. Encourage a referral to the Wellness Center, when needed. Be optimistic, yet realistic. It may be necessary to set some limits or firm resolution.
 - Example, “I want you to start cutting back how much you drink.”
6. I will – Indicate your support, what you are willing to do to help, and your limitations. Don’t make promises you cannot or will not keep. *DON’T* promise absolute confidentiality.

✧ **Things to remember:**

- Talking to a person about a sensitive issue does not always work the first time. Have a second conversation if the first does not work.
- First-year students are at an increased risk for heavy drinking.
- Look out for those students who come into college with established drinking/drug use patterns.
- Educate yourself on resources before you need to use them.
- It can be helpful to observe and document behaviors. Prepare a list of specific concerns before having a conversation with a student.
- Choose a location and time where you can talk in *private* without embarrassment or interruptions.
- Document your conversation with the student.
- Provide the student with Wellness Center contact information, *but it is up to the student to seek the professional services.*
- If your concerns worsen, contact the Dean of Students office or the Wellness Center for support.