

Talking with a Loved One About Exploring Treatment for a Substance Use Disorder.

A point of contention that often emerges when we want to speak with a loved one is whether they “really” have a “problem” or not. We encourage you to sidestep this debate. More than most disorders out there, addictions are tethered to and burdened by cultural messages, stigma, and a lack of consensus by professionals who treat the issue. Here are a couple of things to keep in mind and to get you past this hump for now:

1. There is a large continuum with many points between “abstinence” and “addiction.” In other words, you don’t have to be “addicted” to have a “problem.” That would be like suggesting you’re only “sick” unless you have a life-threatening illness.
2. Second, the first stage of “getting help” is finding out if there is a problem with the person’s substance use and if so, how severe it is. In other words, getting help or going to treatment doesn’t mean a 30-day sentence to a residential treatment center. Treatment has evolved and there are many outpatient treatment options available.

The most important thing you can do is prepare for a discussion like this and what you are looking to accomplish in the preparation phase:

1. Pick an ideal time to have this discussion. A reactionary discussion can easily lead to conflict—try your best to pick a day and time that takes pressure off as possible. Think about things like: when neither of you will be in a rush, neither of you are hungry; anything you can do to lower the stakes.
2. Think about the behaviors you have seen with your eyes and/or heard with your ears that have you worried or concerned. Write three of those down as specifically as possible.
3. Write down what you need from them; what you would like to see happen.
4. Let them know the dreams you have for your relationship with them and write those down.
5. Take a cue from the authors of *Beyond Addiction* (see below for more information) and write the word NATO in all caps. NATO stands for Not Attached to the Outcome. It often takes many conversations like this with our loved ones. Do your best not to put additional pressure on yourself and your loved one by convincing yourself that you **MUST** get them to treatment. While this is a desired outcome, it is equally important to remember changing **HOW** the conversation happens is in-itself an important outcome.
6. Now write the word LOVE down in all caps. This is the true message we’re sending to our loved ones; that we love them.
7. Lastly, write the words “Broken Record.” This is to help remind you that you only need to say what you’ve written and that you don’t need to get pulled into additional topics that may have your message become forgotten or obscured.

When you’re ready to have the conversation with your loved one, **bring your notes with you and be ready to read directly from the page.** This will a) help you remember and be clear and b) stay grounded in important ideas like NATO, being a broken record, if need be, and keeping a message of love.

Here’s a quick example:



I love you; I care about you and this isn't easy for us. But I love you enough to do this anyway. I'm going to go over some things with you for the next several minutes and I just need you to do your best to listen. You'll have your chance to respond, I promise.

Yesterday you drove home from work, I smelled alcohol on your breath and heard you slur your words.

Tuesday you missed an important meeting because you slept in after drinking the night before.

Last month you told me you were going to take a break from drinking and after two days you started drinking again when we went out to dinner.

I need you to find out whether you have a drinking problem from a professional and I want to be a part of the process. I'd like to get an appointment on the books and go to the appointment with you and figure this out.

I want to grow old with you. I want to travel the world with you. I want you to be by my side for years to come.

Resources:

Of Course, you don't have to do this alone! Project Courage can help, and we have staff trained to walk you through this process.

Additionally, here are two great resources to explore:

- *Beyond Addiction: How Science and Kindness Help People Change* by Jeffrey Foote, Carrie Wilkens, Nicole Kosanke, Stephanie Higgs
 - And, here is the link to authors' website that has several resources: [Resources for Families](http://ResourcesforFamilies.com) • [The Center for Motivation & Change \(motivationandchange.com\)](http://TheCenterforMotivation&Change.com)
- For parents, additional resources can be found on the Partnership to End Addiction's website: [Partnership to End Addiction \(drugfree.org\)](http://PartnershiptoEndAddiction.org)