

Alcohol Awareness Tip Sheet

Nick Bayer, LMSW, CAADC-DP – Associate Director of Clinical Services

- **What to do if your teen is drinking:**
 - The first time you find out your teen is drinking, **don't panic**, but ask open-ended questions to get more details.
 - Lots of teens experiment with substances, so if your teen is experimenting, that is not out of the ordinary. However, being able to have **open conversations with them and maintaining trust** with them will allow you to guide, encourage, and monitor them as they make choices regarding their experimentation.
 - **It's okay to ask for help.** If it's already a repeated issue, seek counseling and additional support.
 - Continue to have open conversations with your teen about expectations, boundaries, and consequences if they are breaking trust, breaking boundaries, or engaging in risky behavior. **Make these boundaries, expectations, and consequences clear and explicit** - teens will quickly forget, confuse, or misremember vague, casual expectations.
 - If you consume alcohol yourself, get rid of all the alcohol in your house if it is a problem for your teen or lock it up and keep careful track of how much and what you have. Even though it is legal for you as the parent, **having it around could be a trigger for your teen** to use and gives your teen greater access to it so do what you can to limit those triggers and that access.
 - **Model for your teen that it is possible to have fun and relax without needing alcohol** - i.e., have parties with nonalcoholic drinks and use other strategies to unwind.
 - Refrain from judgment and have open conversations so you can **understand why your teen is drinking.**
- **When does drinking become a problem?**
 - Drinking typically becomes a problem **when it becomes a need.**
 - If **you can't imagine relaxing, or having fun, or engaging in work, school, or other social situations without alcohol**, that is a sign that you are dependent on it, which is a problem.
 - Another sign that drinking is becoming a problem is when you find your tolerance to alcohol growing higher and higher. Tolerance is different for different people, with some having a naturally lower tolerance to the effects of alcohol and others having a high tolerance. But in either case, **if you need to continue to increase the alcohol you drink to get the same effect, that usually indicates that you are chasing the feelings associated with alcohol to the detriment of your mind, body, and vital organs such as your liver.**
 - Other **warning signs that drinking is becoming a problem** include:
 - Needing alcohol in the morning frequently to get rid of lingering effects of alcohol from the night before
 - Spending significant amounts of money on alcohol each week
 - Feeling sick or uncomfortable when you go without alcohol for a day or two
- **Having conversations with kids about drinking alcohol:**

- **Talk about alcohol in a balanced way** - the good and the bad. Alcohol can have cultural significance, religious significance, and a role in the social interactions in appropriate settings. But it can also have a negative impact on the brain – especially developing brains, the body, how it makes you feel (emotionally and physically).
 - If you focus too much on the bad, kids will eventually begin to pick up on the messages in tv and online that talk about the good parts, and **may be more likely to experiment with it without telling you because they think that you will judge them or criticize them because you always said alcohol was bad.** They may also become judgmental and harsh towards other families or people who do use alcohol, even when they use it appropriately.
 - If you focus too much on the good, **kids will try it for the good effects and have a harder time understanding when they get in trouble for using it** and the realities of use.
- If kids ask questions, **answer them patiently and openly** - open discussion is important, and kids need to know they can trust you to talk openly with them about things that may be taboo to ask other people.
- **Supporting a loved one who struggles with alcoholism:**
 - **Ask them directly how they will feel the most supported.**
 - Some people will be fine if you drink around them, as long as you don't offer it to them.
 - Some people would prefer you to not drink around them at all, but don't mind if you talk about it.
 - Some people may not even want you to mention it.
 - Ask if it would be helpful to check in about their recovery every so often.
 - If you still drink alcohol, don't pretend that you don't or tiptoe around alcohol when you're with your loved one who is trying to recover - **just be sensitive in how you talk about it**, not to glorify it or tell stories that could lead them to relapse.
 - **Find other activities** to do with them that don't need or usually include alcohol.
 - Check in on how their recovery is going, and refrain from judgment if they relapse - **being a safe person for them to get support from means that you will understand relapse can happen to anyone.**
 - Don't enable the relapse either - be understanding, and then ask open-ended questions about what they learned from the relapse experience and how they will prevent it from happening again.