

If an alcoholic is unwilling to seek help, is there any way to get him or her into treatment?

This can be a challenging situation. An alcoholic cannot be forced to get help except under certain circumstances, such as when a violent incident results in police being called or following a medical emergency. This doesn't mean, however, that you have to wait for a crisis to make an impact. Based on clinical experience, many alcoholism treatment specialists recommend the following steps to help an alcoholic accept treatment:

Stop all "rescue missions."

Family members often try to protect an alcoholic from the results of his or her behavior by making excuses to others about his or her drinking and by getting him or her out of alcohol-related jams. It is important to stop all such rescue attempts immediately, so that the alcoholic will fully experience the harmful effects of his or her drinking--and thereby become more motivated to stop.

Time your intervention.

Plan to talk with the drinker shortly after an alcohol-related problem has occurred--for example, a serious family argument in which drinking played a part or an alcohol-related accident. Also choose a time when he or she is sober, when both of you are in a calm frame of mind, and when you can speak privately.

Be specific.

Tell the family member that you are concerned about his or her drinking and want to be supportive in getting help. Back up your concern with examples of the ways in which his or her drinking has caused problems for both of you, including the most recent incident.

State the consequences.

Tell the family member that until he or she gets help, you will carry out consequences--not to punish the drinker, but to protect yourself from the harmful effects of the drinking. These may range from refusing to go with the person to any alcohol-related social activities to moving out of the house. Do not make any threats you are not prepared to carry out.

Be ready to help.

Gather information in advance about local treatment options. If the person is willing to seek help, call immediately for an appointment with a treatment program counselor. Offer to go with the family member on the first visit to a treatment program and/or AA meeting.

Call on a friend.

If the family member still refuses to get help, ask a friend to talk with him or her, using the steps described above. A friend who is a recovering alcoholic may be particularly persuasive, but any caring, nonjudgmental friend may be able to make a difference. The intervention of more than one person, more than one time, is often necessary to persuade an alcoholic person to seek help.

Find strength in numbers.

With the help of a professional therapist, some families join with other relatives and friends to confront an alcoholic as a group. While this approach may be effective, it should only be attempted under the guidance of a therapist who is experienced in this kind of group intervention.

Get support.

Whether or not the alcoholic family member seeks help, you may benefit from the encouragement and support of other people in your situation. Support groups offered in most communities include Al-Anon, which holds regular meetings for spouses and other significant adults in an alcoholic's life, and Alateen, for children of alcoholics. These groups help family members understand that they are not responsible for an alcoholic's drinking and that they need to take steps to take care of themselves, regardless of whether the alcoholic family member chooses to get help.

For meeting locations, call your local Al-Anon chapter (check your local phone book under "Alcoholism") or call the following toll-free numbers: 1-800-344-2666