

## **Approaching a Loved One About Substance Abuse: The Dos and Don'ts of Intervention**

In his best selling book, *I'll Quit Tomorrow*, the late Dr. Vernon Johnson wrote that the hallmark of alcoholism and drug dependence is denial. Accordingly, most substance abusers believe that their problems are caused by others, bad luck or circumstances beyond their control. Because they routinely fail to make the connection between their drug use and harmful behavior, intervention is necessary.

### **Telling the truth—in a way it can be heard**

Johnson defined intervention as: "Telling the truth—in a way it can be heard." Shouting and empty threats may be grounded in truth but generally are counterproductive. For example, a frustrated wife meets her inebriated husband at the door at 2 a.m. and gives him a piece of her mind, to which he replies, "No wonder I stay out and drink. Every time I come home you scream at me."

### **What is intervention?**

Intervention is a process in which concerned family, friends and sometimes the employer convene under the direction of a specialist to confront a substance abuser. Planning is the key. It may take several weeks to find an intervention specialist and recruit and educate participants. Be patient. Waiting a few weeks and doing a properly planned intervention is far better than rushing in unprepared. Here are some things to consider about the intervention process.

### **Dos and don'ts**

**Don't** wait for a loved one to hit bottom because the bottom she may hit may be jail, or serious injury to self or others.

If you are ambivalent about proceeding, ask yourself: "Of all the time, energy and tears I have invested in trying to make her stop, what has been successful?" If the answer is "nothing," you are in good company. Anger, tears and empty threats have never cured one single disease. If all your efforts to help your loved one have failed—and made you miserable in the process, then letting go and getting help couldn't be any worse. And your time is better spent on those people for whom you can make a difference.

**Don't** enable the problem by making excuses or "covering up" for the substance abuser any longer. When a person has to face the consequences of his actions directly, he is more interested in seeking help.

**Do** spend your time in the solution, not the problem. Focus on the next step—not a cure for addiction.

**Don't** go it alone. Ask for help. Let *trusted* friends, family or clergy in on the secret. Tell them you want their help in doing an intervention.

**Do** contact an addiction professional in your community and ask for help in setting up an intervention. The toll-free phone number on this site is a good place to start.

**Don't** bluff. Be willing to follow through on any threats or promises you make. Be sure to communicate these conditions clearly and calmly.

**Do** decide how much longer you are willing to put up with the pain, fear and frustration caused by drugs and alcohol. That's exactly how long it will continue.

**Do** stay in the present. Talk about how substance abuse affects you today—and one thing you can change today. Tomorrow will take care of itself.

**Don't** expect a miracle. The purpose of an intervention is to force someone to get help. The person does not have to like it or thank you for it. As soon as she agrees to the recommendations, the intervention is over. Do not expect her to be happy.

**Do** attend support groups such as Al-Anon and Parents Anonymous. These groups offer excellent support for family and friends of substance abusers.

### **Resources**

*I'll Quit Tomorrow: A Practical Guide to Alcoholism* (revised edition) by Vernon E. Johnson. Harper & Row, 1980.

*The Betty Ford Center Book of Answers: Help for Those Struggling With Substance Abuse and for the People Who Love Them* by James W. West, MD, Betty Ford. Pocket Books, 1997.

By Drew Edwards, MS  
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