



## When an Older Parent has an Alcohol or Other Substance Use Problem: How Families Can Help

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Alcohol and medication use problems are much more common in older families than many people might think. Fortunately, many older adults are able to reduce the harm of their alcohol or medication use, especially with appropriate help in the community and the support of family members and others who are about them. Here are a few starting points you may find useful:

- . Treat the person with dignity and respect.
- . Offer a supportive relationship.
- . Be gentle and caring. Bring up the person's good qualities and happy memories you share.
- . Recognize the older adult's values and attitudes.
- . Be positive and optimistic.
- . Be direct. Sometimes we coddle an older person like a child. Treat the person as an adult.
- . Be specific about your concerns, the things you have noticed.
- . Present the facts in a straightforward manner. Use phrases such as "I've noticed" or "I'm worried", since a person cannot argue with your feelings.
- . Focus on the effects that the alcohol or prescription drugs are having on the person's life.
- . Present the effects of alcohol or drug use in relation to whatever the older adult cares about most (e.g. health, independence, being able to stay in their home, recreational activities).
- . Some older adults may care about their health or what others are saying about them. Some may have given up on themselves, but still care deeply for their grandchildren.
- . Avoid words like "alcoholic" or "drug addict." These words are not helpful and carry a great deal of negative stigma.
- . Do not bother pouring alcohol down the sink or throwing away tranquilizers. If the person is not ready to receive help at this point, he or she will replenish the supply.

