

# How to Stage an Intervention

Step in before your family member hurts himself or others, experts say.

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*Dec. 5, 2016, at 12:57 p.m.*

A family member is struggling with [alcohol or drug abuse](#). You've begged and cajoled him to stop, but he's deteriorating, missing family events and driving while impaired. When should you and other people who care for him step in and [conduct an intervention](#) to try to convince him to seek help for his substance abuse problem?

If someone's alcohol or drug abuse is causing them to behave in ways that put their own safety and those of others at risk – for instance, by driving or operating heavy equipment while under the influence – it's time to conduct an intervention to persuade them to get help, says [Dr. Jeff Baxter](#), chief medical officer at Spectrum Health Systems, based in Worcester, Massachusetts. "If their safety or your own is at risk, it's definitely time to act," Baxter says.

## Danger and Denial

People suffering from alcoholism or [addiction](#) are typically in denial about their condition, and therefore don't recognize the peril they cause not only themselves but their passengers when they drive while impaired, experts say. Those passengers could include their own kids and significant other.

There are other signs. If the person struggling with substance abuse is spending a large amount of his or her income on drugs or has been arrested for driving under the influence, it's time to try to get him or her into treatment, says [Tina Muller](#), family wellness program manager at Mountainside Treatment Center, based in Canaan, Connecticut.

## Confronting Consequences

"Addictions only progress over time, they get worse," Muller says. "It's better to act before there are multiple DUI [driving under the influence] arrests." An alcoholic or addict whose drinking and drug use is spiraling out of control can in short order lose a job, their freedom and possibly their life.

Tens of millions of people in the United States suffer from alcoholism and addiction. A study published in June 2015 in the journal JAMA Psychiatry found that 32 million adults had struggled with a serious drinking problem the previous year. About 27 million people used illicit drugs, mostly [marijuana](#), according to the 2014 National Survey on Drug Use and Health.

An intervention can be conducted by family members and friends. In an intervention, friends and relatives gather to confront a person they are worried about to describe how his or her alcoholism or addiction is affecting them, and to ask the person to seek treatment. Employers at large companies also conduct interventions, often in conjunction with employee assistance program counselors.

Experts offer this advice for people considering conducting an intervention for a loved one struggling with alcoholism or addiction:

**1. Educate yourself.** Learn as much as you can about the chronic nature of alcoholism and addiction to better understand what your loved one is experiencing. “You don’t want to bring your own misinformation to the problem,” says [Dr. Melinda Campopiano](#), chief medical officer for the Center for Substance Abuse Treatment at the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.

Your [primary care doctor](#) could provide background on the diseases of addiction and alcoholism or refer you to experts. The websites of reputable addiction treatment facilities such as the [Mayo Clinic](#) are also good resources.

**2. Hire or consult an expert.** If you have the financial resources, you could hire a certified intervention professional, who will coach family members and close friends of the person struggling with alcoholism and addiction, moderate the intervention, help set up rehabilitation services and work with family members as the individual begins his recovery. Interventionists typically charge between \$1,500 to \$20,000, depending on the depth and length of services. A moderator makes sure everyone says what they need to and can keep long-standing emotions from boiling over.

People who can’t afford an interventionist could hire a counselor familiar with addiction on an hourly basis for a few hundred dollars to coach them and, if they choose, to mediate the event, says [Anita Gadhia-Smith](#), a [psychotherapist](#) who practices in the District of Columbia and Bethesda, Maryland. “Not everyone has \$7,000 for an interventionist,” Gadhia-Smith says. “A lot of people are capable of organizing and executing an intervention if they have been given good professional advice.” If a family staging an intervention goes to church, they could ask a pastor or trusted family friend to moderate.

**3. Be direct and honest, but don’t attack the substance abuser.** During the intervention, family members and close friends should tell the person struggling with alcohol or drugs how concerned they are for his or her well-being and provide specific examples of how their behavior is affecting them, says [Anne Lewis](#), a psychologist and clinical addiction counselor with Indiana University Health, based in Indianapolis. But avoid criticizing. “If you start blaming them for your inability to sleep or being on [anxiety](#) medication, the person can feel attacked and ganged up on and is less likely to agree to get help,” Lewis says.

**4. Bring up consequences, and be prepared to follow through.** Family members and close friends should make it clear to the person who's struggling with alcohol or drugs that they care for them, but also that there will be consequences if they don't seek help.

For example, a spouse could tell her husband that he will have to move out of the home if he doesn't go to rehab. If he's the only breadwinner, she could say she will lock him out of the house if he's not home by a certain hour because he's out drinking or using drugs, Muller says. The people staging the intervention must be prepared to follow through; otherwise, they lose credibility.

**5. Have a rehab center lined up.** If the person drinking and using drugs excessively agrees to get help, have a bed ready for him or her at a rehabilitation center right away, experts say. "You need to have everything squared away at a treatment facility," says [Beth Kane-Davidson](#), director of the addiction treatment center at Suburban Hospital in Bethesda.

You don't want to give the person a night or even a few hours to change his mind, and you don't want to take the chance that he will try to quit drinking or using drugs without medical supervision. Alcoholics and addicts can suffer terrible withdrawal symptoms if they suddenly quit drinking or using drugs, particularly barbiturates and opioids, Kane-Davidson says.

**6. Keep your expectations in check.** Don't declare victory if the intervention is successful and the struggling loved one agrees to go to rehab. [Alcoholism](#) and addiction are [chronic conditions](#) and recovery is an ongoing journey, not an event, Campopiano says. "It's the beginning of a process. There will be ups and downs."