

What should you do if you're worried a friend could be using drugs?

If you are worried a friend could be using drugs, there are steps you can take that can make a big difference. Sometimes, simply talking with a friend about their drug use and expressing concern can help them think about their behaviour more closely and, as a result, make positive changes.

Starting a conversation with a friend about their drug use can be difficult. Make sure you are well prepared. It may help to make a list of the incidents that have caused you to be concerned and to find out about the professional help that is available, should your friend need it.

When talking with your friend, make sure you:

- choose the right time
- choose the right place
- find something positive to say
- only talk about how you're feeling
- distinguish between the person and the behaviour

- be specific
- don't accuse or argue

Always remember that you are not responsible for your friend's drug use, as with all the other choices they will make in their life. It is ultimately up to them to make decisions that will affect their life and you can't do that for them.

Trying to get someone to stop using drugs or seek professional help is not always going to work – no matter what you do. As a result, friendships may be broken. If this happens, make sure you have someone you can talk to about how you are feeling and how to move forward.

If you believe a friend is using drugs and is at risk of serious harm (whether it be physically, mentally or socially), it is vital that you tell a responsible adult as soon as possible. When it comes to saving a friend's life, concerns about breaking trust and affecting friendships need to be put to one side.

What could cause you to worry about a friend?

There are many things that could cause you to worry about a friend who may be using drugs. Sometimes specific behaviours may cause concern, including:

- giving up activities he or she used to do
- talking about drugs and drug use constantly and becoming entrenched in the drug culture
- taking risks, including sexual risks
- appearing to experience a range of mental health problems, including depression, paranoia or suicidal thoughts
- making friends with people who are known drug users
- getting in trouble with the law and not appearing to care about the consequences

Sometimes there may not be specific behaviours that are causing concern. You may just simply have found out or believe your friend is using drugs and are worried about them. You may be concerned that your friend is doing something illegal and, at the very least, this could get them into trouble with the law.

Should you get involved and can you make a difference?

If you believe a friend is using drugs and is at risk of serious harm (whether it be physically, mentally or socially), it is vital that you tell a responsible adult (e.g., a parent or teacher, a school counsellor or youth worker) as soon as possible. When it comes to saving a friend's life, concerns about breaking trust and affecting friendships need to be put to one side.

It can be a very big step to confront a friend who you think may be using drugs. Questions that may be going around your head when you are trying to work out what to do could include the following:

- what if I get my friend into trouble?
- what if I lose my friend over this?
- what if I don't do anything and something terrible happens?

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Many young people are afraid to discuss serious issues with their friends because they fear being rejected and, as a result, lose their friendship. It is never going to be easy to tell a friend that you believe they have a problem. But always remember that if you aren't going to discuss the problem with them, the chances are that no-one will. If they are getting into trouble with drugs the next person who speaks to them about the topic could be a police officer or an emergency department worker. Taking action in an appropriate way could prevent a bigger problem in the future.

Although it is not always the case, it is important to know that you can make a difference. Sometimes, simply expressing concern about a friend's drug use can make the person examine their own behaviour more closely and, as a result, make changes. Whatever you choose to do, it needs to be well-thought-out and planned. However, whether or not the friend takes the advice and the offer of friendship, that is completely their decision and it is impossible to control how they will respond. As the old saying goes: 'You can take a horse to water but you can't make it drink' – you can only do your best, nothing more!

What should you do?

Before you talk to your friend it is important to gather as much information about the topic as you can, as well as find out where professional help is available, should your friend need it. Simple things like collecting the phone numbers of helplines and counselling services and storing them somewhere safe can be extremely useful. Visiting the local community health centre and picking up some brochures regarding services in the local area can also be helpful. This information is not necessarily going to be given to your friend when you first raise the issue with them but it is vital that you have it to hand if ever a crisis situation occurs.

Prepare a list of specific issues or incidents that have caused you to worry. These should be as specific as possible, making sure that you only talk about how your friend's drug-using behaviour has affected you and not other people, e.g., *"When you were stoned you became very paranoid and accused me of things that weren't true. You said them in front of other people. That hurt my feelings."*

When talking with your friend, make sure you:

Choose the right time – trying to talk to them when they are drug-affected is not going to work, however the conversation is much more likely to have an impact after something bad has happened, so keeping a lookout for an opportunity to raise the issue is a good idea.

Choose the right place – you don't want to be overheard or interrupted so public places should be avoided. A discussion in a bedroom or somewhere else quiet is probably going to be most effective.

Find something positive to say – no matter how bad things are, try to start with something good. This will help to remind your friend that the conversation is about care and concern rather than criticism and judgement, e.g., *"You are a wonderful person and I care about you very much, but your drug use is changing you and that upsets me"*.

Only talk about how you're feeling – don't bring up what other people may be thinking. Try hard to avoid generalizations like "Everyone is really worried about you", as this will only lead to the friend becoming very defensive and demanding to know who 'everyone' is, e.g., *"I'm really worried about you and I don't want anything bad to happen to you"*.

Distinguish between the person and the behaviour – you still care about your friend but you believe that drug use changes their behaviour. Emphasise what is causing the problem – remove the drug and the person will return, e.g., *"You are one of my best friends but when you smoke dope you change. When you are stoned you are not fun to be with"*.

Be specific – identify specific incidents that have occurred and talk about how they have affected you. Statements like "I don't like you using drugs" are not very helpful and are likely to be regarded as judgments rather than helpful advice, e.g., *"After you took ecstasy you were so sick. You were vomiting for almost an hour before you felt better. I missed out on a big part of the night because I was so worried about you"*.

Don't accuse or argue – your friend may get angry and lash out, bringing up things they don't like about you. Try to remain calm and stay focused on what you are trying to do by explaining why you are worried as clearly as possible, e.g., *"I understand that there are things that I do that may*

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upset you but for now I am very concerned about what is happening to you. Maybe we can talk about my faults later. I am worried about your drug use and what is happening to our friendship”.

There is no way of knowing how your friend will react to this type of conversation and you need to be prepared for it not to go well.

What if you can't change their behaviour?

Helping a friend with a drug issue is hard work and it can be a very difficult experience for all concerned. You may feel as though you are being a bad friend if you don't succeed in getting them to change their behaviour or worried that, if your friend continues to use, there may be tragic consequences. Always remember that you are not responsible for your friend's drug use, as with all the other choices they will make in their life. It is ultimately up to the individual to make decisions that will affect their life and you can't do that for them.

As harsh as it may sound, the reality is that as hard as you may try to encourage someone to stop using drugs or seek professional help, sometimes it just isn't going to happen – no matter what you do. As a result, friendships are lost. If this happens, make sure you try to get some additional support from either a responsible adult or a trained professional to talk through how you are feeling and how to move forward. As much as your friend may need help, it is important to remember that you have been through a tough experience and may also need assistance.