Dealing with an Alcoholic

Having an alcoholic family member is never easy. It means watching someone you care about fall deeper into an addiction, lose interest in life and become a danger to themselves or others. If you suspect alcoholism is affecting a family member, you can deal with the issue by:

Telling the sufferer how you feel. When your loved one is sober, honestly discuss your worries and fears. If you're not sure exactly what to say, coaching from a counsellor or addiction specialist can help. While you may secretly hope that your words will be an instant "wake up call" to your loved one, the reality might be quite different. Be prepared for anger and flat out denial of the problem. Remember: you can't control your loved one's actions or response. Avoid a confrontation when he or she has been drinking as you'll be negotiating with the addiction rather than your loved one.

Acknowledging the problem. Be honest about how your loved one's addiction is affecting your life and family. Pretending the alcoholism doesn't exist won't really help anyone and will only lead to more fallout down the road.

Not enabling. 'Covering up' issues by taking on the responsibilities that your partner can't or won't do lets your loved one 'get away' with bad decisions and poor behaviour without ever having to deal with the consequences of his or her actions.

Maintaining a sense of self. Some partners get so caught up in covering up for the alcoholic and taking care of family responsibilities that their identity becomes completely tied to 'managing' the situation and shouldering the blame. Remember: the alcoholism is not your fault and shouldn't define your core being. Whether it's joining a gym, meeting a friend for coffee or taking a class, look for ways to give yourself a regular emotional break from the relationship. Doing so can help you recharge and can give you the space you need to gain more perspective on the situation.

Getting help. Make sure you have someone you can talk to about your feelings, such as a trusted friend or family member, or mental health professional. You can also look to groups, such as Al-Anon, that provide support to families and friends of alcoholics.

Staying safe. If alcohol is causing someone in your family to behave violently towards themselves or others, remove yourself—as well as any children—from the situation and seek professional help immediately.

Alcoholism is a disease that can affect your entire family. Assess the role you play in the alcoholic's life and get the support you need. If you are troubled by someone's drinking, contact a professional or counsellor for further support.