

Drug Abuse

by Leslie Kausch, M.Ed. LPC, Licensed Counselor



A former client called to say she needed to come in as soon as possible to talk about her son. At 15, he had recently become combative, refusing to follow any of the rules at home, often skipping school, and failing classes even when he did attend. My client had noticed that some cash and valuables had disappeared recently, though her son angrily denied that he had taken anything. He never had friends over anymore, choosing to sleep late when he could and stay out well past curfew out “with friends”. He rarely washed his clothes, and sometimes went days without showering. She and her husband were at the end of their rope, and were considering involving the police or forcing their son into some kind of inpatient treatment.

As anyone who follows the news knows, we are in the midst of the latest drug epidemic, this one involving prescription and nonprescription opioids. People in the middle of their own addiction can rarely get out of the addiction by themselves, but it’s also hard for them to let people close to them help them either. Teens, in particular, are in the midst of growing more independent of parents, so addicted teens are often even less able to accept help from adults who love them.

This intersection of adolescent independence and the power of an addiction leave parents with no easy options. A doctor may be able diagnose a substance use or abuse disorder and refer a teen to treatment, but this can be expensive, and the teen may not cooperate. Some parents choose to involve the police and courts, in order to access additional treatment options, but this may mean that their teen has to work around a criminal record later. Other parents try to handle the addiction on their own, but find themselves powerless in the face of their teen’s mood swings, combativeness, and stealing.

So then, what should a parent do if they suspect their teen is addicted to drugs or alcohol? Here’s what seemed helpful to my client:

1. Get help for yourself! Seek out counseling from someone who has experience working with these issues. Many families have found support at Al-Anon or Nar-Anon as well. They offer many free meeting times in various places across the Triad.
2. Talk to your teen – not preaching or yelling – just talk. Reassure her that you love her, and you are concerned. Let her know that you are trying to help, and identify any strength or positive behavior you’ve seen, no matter how small it is.
3. Review the rules. Calmly remind your teens about the family rules. Look for places that you are willing to be flexible, but stand firm on the ones that are non-negotiable. It may be useful to be clear about the limits of your support. Are you willing to bail her out of jail? Pay for a lawyer?
4. Encourage other adults who are close to your teen to reach out to her. Sometimes a teen can hear something from another trusted adult that she can’t hear from her parents.

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5. Be realistic about what your family can handle. It is useful for parents to decide when they will call for professional help. Most families try to help their teen on their own, but it's always better to be clear about when a situation has progressed past what a family is capable of managing.
6. Know your options. Talk to your counselor and your child's physician to find out what help is available.
7. See Step 1. An addiction demands a lot of resources from everyone close to an addicted teen – resources like time, energy, money. Keep connected to resources for you!

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