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Intervention: Help a loved one overcome addiction

An intervention can motivate someone to seek help for alcohol or drug misuse, compulsive eating, or other addictive behaviors. Discover when to hold one and how to make it successful.

[By Mayo Clinic Staff](#)

It's hard helping a loved one who is struggling with any type of addiction. Sometimes a direct, heart-to-heart conversation can start the road to recovery. But when it comes to addiction, the person with the issue often struggles to see there's an issue. A more focused approach often is needed. You may need to join forces with others and take action through a formal intervention.

Examples of addictions where an intervention may be needed include:

- Alcohol use disorder.
- Prescription drug misuse.
- Street drug misuse.
- Compulsive eating.
- Compulsive gambling.

People who struggle with addiction often won't accept their situation and don't want to seek treatment. They may not accept the negative effects their behavior has on themselves and others.

An intervention gives your loved one a chance to make changes before things get even worse. It's also a chance to accept help.

What is an intervention?

An intervention is a carefully planned process that family and friends can do, working with a doctor or another health care professional, such as a licensed alcohol and drug counselor. An intervention professional, also known as an interventionist, also could direct an intervention. It sometimes includes a member of your loved one's faith community or others who care about the person struggling with addiction.

During the intervention, these people gather together to face your loved one, talk about the effects of their addiction and ask them to

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accept treatment. The intervention:

- Provides examples of destructive behaviors and how they affect your loved one with the addiction, as well as family and friends.
- Offers a treatment plan with clear steps, goals and guidelines.
- Spells out what each person will do if your loved one doesn't accept treatment.

How does a typical intervention work?

An intervention usually includes these steps:

1. **Make a plan.** A family member or friend suggests an intervention and forms a planning group. It's best if you work with a qualified professional, such as a counselor, addiction professional, psychologist, mental health counselor, social worker or interventionist, to help you organize an effective intervention. An intervention is a highly charged situation that could cause anger, resentment or a sense of betrayal.
2. **Gather information.** The group members find out about the scale of your loved one's issue and research what's causing this issue and how it can be treated. The group may arrange to enroll your loved one in a treatment program.
3. **Form the intervention team.** The planning group forms a team that will participate in the intervention. Team members set a date and location and work together to present a consistent, rehearsed message and a structured plan. Often, members of the team who aren't family help keep the discussion focused on the facts of the issue and shared solutions rather than strong emotional responses. Don't let your loved one know what you're doing until the day of the intervention.
4. **Decide on specific outcomes.** If your loved one doesn't accept treatment, each person on the team needs to decide what action they will take. For example, you may decide to ask your loved one to move out.
5. **Make notes on what to say.** Each team member describes specific incidents where the addiction caused issues, such as emotional or financial issues. Discuss the toll of your loved one's behavior while still being caring and feeling that your loved one can change. Your loved one cannot argue with facts or with your emotional response to the issue. For example, begin by saying, "I was upset and hurt when you drank ..."
6. **Hold the intervention meeting.** Without providing the reason, your loved one with the addiction is asked to the intervention site. Members of the team then take turns sharing their concerns and feelings. Your loved one is offered a treatment option and asked to accept that option on the spot. Each team member will say what specific changes they will make if your loved one doesn't accept the plan. Don't say you'll do something unless you're ready to take that action.
7. **Follow up.** Involving a spouse, family members or others is key to helping someone with an addiction stay in treatment and not slip. This can include changing patterns of everyday living to make it easier to stay away from destructive

behavior, offering to take part in counseling with your loved one, seeking your own therapist and recovery support, and knowing what to do if your loved one slips.

A successful intervention must be planned carefully to work as planned. A poorly planned intervention can make the situation worse. Your loved one may feel attacked and become isolated or more opposed to treatment.

Work with an addiction professional

Working with an addiction professional, such as a licensed alcohol and drug counselor, social worker, psychologist, psychiatrist, or interventionist, can help you organize an effective intervention. An addiction professional will think about what's going on in your loved one's life, suggest the best approach, and guide you in what type of treatment and follow-up plan is likely to work best.

Often interventions occur without an intervention professional taking part. But having expert help may be best. Sometimes the intervention occurs at the professional's office.

It may be especially important to have the professional attend the intervention to help you stay on track if your loved one:

- Has a history of serious mental illness.
- Has a history of violence.
- Has tried suicide or recently talked about suicide.
- May be taking several mood-altering substances.

It's very important to work with a professional for an intervention to succeed. This is especially true if you think your loved one may react violently or harm themselves.

Who should be on the intervention team?

An intervention team usually includes 4 to 6 people who are important in your loved one's life — people your loved one likes, respects or depends on. This may include, for example, a best friend, adult relatives or a member of your loved one's faith community. Your intervention professional can help you figure out who should be on your team.

Don't include anyone who:

- Your loved one doesn't like.
- Has a mental health issue or substance abuse issue that isn't being managed.
- May not be able to limit what they say to what you agreed on during the planning meeting.
- Might interfere with the intervention.

If you think it's important to have someone involved but worry that it may create an issue during the intervention, consider having that person write a short letter. Then someone else can read the letter at the intervention.

How do you find a treatment program to offer at the intervention?

An addiction professional helps figure out the scope of the issue and what treatment options would be right. Treatment options can vary in intensity and scope, and they occur in various settings.

Options can include brief early intervention, outpatient treatment or day treatment programs. A structured program, or a stay at a treatment facility or hospital, may be needed for more-serious issues.

Treatment may include counseling, education, job services, family services and life skills training. For example, Mayo Clinic offers various addiction services and has a thorough team approach to treating addiction.

If a treatment program is needed, it may help to make arrangements ahead of time. Do some research, keeping these points in mind:

- **Ask a trusted addiction professional, doctor or mental health professional** about the best treatment approach for your loved one and recommendations about programs.
- **Contact national organizations, trusted online support groups or local clinics** for treatment programs or advice.
- **Find out if your insurance plan will cover the treatment program** you're thinking about.
- **Find out what steps are needed for admission**, such as an evaluation appointment, insurance certification and whether there's a waiting list.
- **Be wary of treatment centers promising quick fixes.** Avoid programs that use uncommon methods or treatments that seem like they could be harmful.
- **If travel is needed for the program, make arrangements ahead of time.** Think about having a packed suitcase ready for your loved one.

It also may be right to ask your loved one to seek support from a group such as Alcoholics Anonymous.

How can you help make sure an intervention succeeds?

Keep in mind that strong emotions are part of your loved one's addiction. The process of organizing the intervention and the intervention itself can cause conflict, anger and resentment, even among family and friends who know your loved one needs their help.

To help an intervention succeed, think about these tips:

- **Don't hold an intervention on the spur of the moment.** It can take several weeks to plan an effective intervention. Be careful not to make the plan too hard because it may be hard to get everyone to follow through.
- **Plan the time of the intervention.** Make sure you choose a date and time when your loved one is least likely to be under the influence of alcohol or drugs.
- **Do your homework.** Research your loved one's addiction or substance abuse issue so that you understand it well.
- **Appoint one point of contact for all team members.** This will help you communicate and stay on track.
- **Share information.** Make sure each team member has the same information about your loved one's addiction and the intervention so that everyone is on the same page. Hold meetings or conference calls to share updates and agree to present a united team.

- **Stage a rehearsal intervention.** Here, you can decide who will speak when, who will sit where and other details. That way there's no fumbling during the real intervention with your loved one.
- **Expect your loved one's objections.** Have calm, rational responses ready for each reason your loved one may give not to be treated or take responsibility for behavior. Offer support that makes it easier to take part in treatment, such as arranging child care or attending counseling sessions with your loved one.
- **Stay away from confrontation.** Deal with your loved one with love, respect, support and concern — not anger. Be honest, but don't use the intervention as a place for attacks. Don't call your loved one names or make angry or accusing statements.
- **Stay on track during the intervention.** Moving away from the plan can quickly derail an intervention, prevent a helpful outcome for your loved one and make family tensions worse. Be prepared to remain calm in the face of your loved one's accusations, hurt or anger — all of which are often meant to redirect or end the conversation.
- **Ask for a decision right away.** Don't give your loved one time to think about whether to accept the treatment offer, even if they ask for a few days to think it over. Doing so allows your loved one to continue denying an issue, go into hiding or go on a dangerous binge. Be prepared to have your loved one start treatment right away if they agree to the plan.

If your loved one doesn't accept help

Unfortunately, not all interventions succeed. In some cases, your loved one with an addiction may not accept the treatment plan. They may get very angry or say that help isn't needed. They also may be resentful and accuse you of betrayal or being a hypocrite.

Emotionally prepare yourself for these situations. But remain hopeful for positive change. If your loved one doesn't accept treatment, be prepared to follow through with the changes you presented.

Often, children, partners, siblings and parents are on the receiving end of abuse, violence, threats and emotional upheaval because of alcohol and drug issues. You can't control the behavior of your loved one with the addiction. But you can remove yourself — and any children — from a dangerous situation.

Even if an intervention doesn't work, you and others in your loved one's life can make changes that may help. Ask other people involved not to feed into the destructive cycle of behavior and take steps to make positive change.

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