

MOTIVATIONAL CONVERSATIONS FOR YOUTH

For youth to talk to other youth about alcohol and other drug use.

NATIONAL
COUNCIL
for Mental
Wellbeing

TALKING WITH A FRIEND ABOUT ALCOHOL OR OTHER DRUGS CAN SEEM TRICKY.

Will they listen? Why are they doing it? Do they think I'll get them in trouble? How will this affect our friendship?



Despite the challenges, talking with your friends and peers about alcohol and other drugs is important.

Supporting change in a friend does not mean that you are responsible for changing them. The true desire to change can only come from within the person themselves. But as a friend and peer, you are in a special position to make an impact because they may be able to relate to you better than an adult, especially when it comes to topics like alcohol and other drugs. That is why your role is so important.

SO, HOW CAN YOU INTERVENE WITH A FRIEND IN A WAY THAT IS USEFUL?

There are conversation skills you can learn to intervene respectfully and inspire others to be drug-free. Keep reading to find out more about the three steps of self-awareness, listening and responding.

3 Steps to Having Useful Conversations Around Alcohol and other Drugs



Self-awareness



The ways you bring your true self, your style and heart to the conversation can be more important than the words you say. Self-awareness is checking in with yourself about what your own attitudes and beliefs are. These attitudes and beliefs show up in how you listen, show empathy, partner and ultimately accept the decisions of others.



“Most of the time, people don’t want to be told what to do or what not to do. They want to be understood.”



EMPATHY is focusing on the wellbeing of your friend in a non-judgmental and non-blaming way. **Example:** *“I want to understand your experience and what it is like for you.”*



PARTNERSHIP is working together to think of solutions, recognizing that you and your friend both have valuable experiences to share. **Example:** *“Let’s work together to brainstorm ideas for how to reroute or redirect yourself when you’re feeling down.”*



ACCEPTANCE is letting their voice be heard, allowing others to have their own feelings, beliefs and experiences and the space to make their own decisions. **Example:** *“You have control over your own choices and no one can truly make decisions about your alcohol and other drug use but you.”*

We all have biases and opinions about what is right and wrong. The more you get in touch with your own beliefs and feelings, the easier it will be to have useful conversations where you hold space for someone else’s feelings, experiences and beliefs on substance use. Putting your own reactions in check, and your own opinions aside will help you create a safe and non-judgmental space for others to open up to you about tough topics.

Listening



After creating a safe and brave space with a collaborative, non-judgmental approach where you and your friend find middle ground, the next step is to listen.

Listening is about staying curious and open to your friend sharing what's on their mind and allowing their ideas to surface. **Example:** *“What are you thinking about? How are you feeling right now?”*

Listening is an important step that gives your friend space to explore their own reasons and abilities for changing their substance use. The more your friend hears themselves saying why and how they might make changes, the more likely they are to follow through.

Your friend may be conflicted about changing their substance use. Listen for any words or phrases that might show your friend's interest in doing things differently, anything they are uncertain about or any steps they have taken to reduce or quit using alcohol and other drugs, no matter how small. These statements are called “change talk,” because the more your friend hears themselves using statements that favor change, the more their own motivation is boosted.

Types of change talk to listen for include:

1. A DESIRE TO CHANGE

- “I feel bad about myself when I smoke and need to get my grades up.”
- “I want to make the swim team this year and be a healthier person.”

2. THE ABILITY TO CHANGE

- “I can deal with my friends who try to pressure me.”
- “I have cut back before.”

3. THEIR REASONS FOR CHANGING

- “Sometimes I am tempted to take a hit, but if I got caught, I'd lose my spot on the team.”
- “I promised my mom I would stop.”

4. THEIR ACTIONS TO CHANGE

- “I've been listening to music when I start to feel anxious.”
- “I asked my brother to hold onto my vape pen for me so I wouldn't be tempted.”

Here is where you may hear healthy coping activities like reading, painting, exercising, etc.

Sometimes “change talk” is tricky to catch and to pick up on. This could be because you are thinking about the next thing to say or because you are too focused on wanting to hear them repeat a bigger goal you had in mind.

But when you are able to pick up on change talk, you can use it to begin to build on the momentum that they already have.



Responding



Conversations are a two-way street. Listening and talking, creating space and also responding. Now that you know more about how to create a safe space through focusing on your own self-awareness and how to listen for “change talk,” the last part is around how to respond to “change talk.”

To have useful conversations around alcohol and other drugs, there are two main techniques you can use to respond to your friend when you hear them using words or phrases that might be “change talk.” The first technique is to ask open-ended questions, and the second technique is called reflection.

Ask Open-ended Questions

What kind of questions are you asking?

An important part of any conversation is the type of questions you use. Open-ended questions invite your friend to go beyond just a simple “yes” or “no” one-word answer. Just as the name suggests, open-ended questions invite openness or, in other words, engagement. They are phrased in a way that requires a longer response to encourage your friend to thoughtfully think through their substance use. Open-ended questions often start with the words “what,” “how” or “tell me more” instead of starters like “did you” or “will you.”

Test Yourself! Can you identify which of the following questions below are open-ended questions? Write T for true, or F for false. Answers are located on the bottom of the last page.

1. _____ “What keeps you going?”
2. _____ “Are you okay?”
3. _____ “How do you blow off steam?”
4. _____ “Don't you get it?”
5. _____ “If there were silver linings or any positives that came from the pandemic, what would they be for you?”
6. _____ “What is something you would tell your future 30-year-old self about this time in your life?”
7. _____ “Do you want to mess up your future?”
8. _____ “What is one tip you would give someone else who is struggling with this issue?”
9. _____ “Can't you just stop using?”
10. _____ “In what ways have you dealt with challenges before?”



Reflect Back

It's common to feel conflicted about substance use. Your friend may be curious to try alcohol and other drugs, but also worried about getting caught. They might want to numb or escape painful feelings, while also being scared of the dangers of overdose and addiction.

If your friend feels uncertain or two different-ways, instead of telling them what to do or not to do (which doesn't tend to be helpful), it can be more useful to instead use a technique called reflection.

Reflection is when you summarize the thoughts and feelings you just heard in your friend's words and tone of voice and repeat back what they have already said, highlighting their uncertainty and any pros or cons they have mentioned.

By reflecting back what they have said, you are holding up a mirror to your friend, showing them their own feelings and words. This technique is useful, as it can help your friend:

- Clarify their own thoughts by hearing their own words repeated back.
- Reassure them that someone is listening and understands what they are saying.
- Think about whether their own thoughts and reasonings make sense.

In reflecting back, it is especially important to repeat the things that your friend has said with uncertainty, mixed emotions or anything that hints at feelings or thoughts around changing their substance use.

WHAT YOUR FRIEND SAYS	WHAT YOU REFLECT BACK
"Lots of people smoke weed without any problems, so I'm not sure if I believe it's a gateway drug."	"So you're saying that on the one hand, some people don't seem to have problems with weed, and on the other hand, it's possible some people move to stronger stuff when the weed just doesn't hit right anymore."
"I don't use anything now, but who's to say I won't try something down the road."	"I'm hearing that while it's possible you'll try something at some point, given where your life is right now, you have reasons to pass."
"My parents are super strict with me, but they were big partiers back in the day so it's pretty hypocritical."	"Your parents used to party a lot and it doesn't make sense why they are so strict with you."

Remember! Gaining the skills to have useful and motivating conversations around your friends' alcohol and other drug use is often compared to learning to play the piano. It takes ongoing practice and commitment to learn and evolve your skills around self-awareness, listening, and responding in a way that is most useful.

As a friend and peer, you have the power to make positive change in preventing alcohol and other drug use. We hope that this worksheet has given you the skills and confidence to begin having these important and life-saving conversations.

