

Intervention Quick Guide

The word "Intervention" is commonly misunderstood. Our Intervention Quick Guide was created to help clarify the term intervention - and to offer information on how to go about conducting one.

So, what is an "Intervention"?

Talking to the person you're concerned about is called an "intervention". There are two types of interventions - informal and formal.

An **informal intervention** means having a personal discussion with the person you're concerned about. This could be as simple as asking a few questions or making a couple of observations.

A **formal intervention** means having a structured conversation with the person. This involves bringing together a group of people with the substance user to explore how his or her use has affected all their lives. The formal intervention is usually used when the person has repeatedly refused to get help.

The point of any intervention is to ask the person to take concrete steps to address the problem and lead them to the help they need (i.e. go for an evaluation, attend counseling, enter in- or out-patient treatment.)

The key thing is not to wait for your loved one to "bottom out," have a car crash or develop some serious health problem before you address your concerns. **Do something now.** Remember, **addiction is treatable.** And there are sensitive, trained healthcare providers who can help you decide how to proceed.

In any intervention - informal or formal - it's important to approach your loved one when he or she is not high or drunk - and when you're not deeply upset.

Here are some additional tips:

- Stay calm
- Couch your comments in concern
- Avoid labeling the person an "alcoholic" or "addict"
- Cite specific incidents resulting from the person's substance abuse ("You were recently arrested for DWI.")
- Stick to what you know firsthand, not hearsay
- Talk in "I statements," explaining how the person's behavior has affected you ("When you drive drunk, I don't sleep all night.")
- Be prepared for denial and resentment
- Be supportive and hopeful about change

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What Are the Necessary Steps for a Formal Intervention?

A formal or structured intervention is a group meeting designed to help the substance user understand the problem and the need to take action and seek treatment.

The first step in a formal intervention is **to gather all the significant people** in a substance user's life, such as immediate and extended family members, physicians, friends, employers, coworkers, religious advisors, neighbors - anyone who can describe the physical and emotional changes and damages they see and experience.

Next this group **meets with a professional**, such as a family therapist or substance use counselor, to learn how to express their concern in a constructive way. The professional educates them about what to expect during the intervention and afterwards, and how they can organize their comments to avoid blaming and to increase the chance that the person will hear their messages.

Then, the group of concerned individuals and their professional guide **meet with the substance user for a conversation**. They express caring and concern, presenting facts about the impact that the substance use has had on them. They convey that they are unwilling to continue to overlook the damage that substance use is having on the person in need and on many others. They press the person to admit that a substance use problem exists and that it is causing many other problems.

The **goal of an intervention** is to get the person to agree to get help (attend a treatment program) immediately. Just promising to stop is considered an unacceptable outcome. Participants must clearly spell out the consequences each will impose if the person refuses treatment. These types of ultimatums can have life-shattering implications, which is why including a professional guide is so important.

10 Tips for a Formal Intervention

Goal: to have the person begin treatment immediately.

1. Enlist a professional to help plan the intervention.
2. Bring together the people most significant to the user (3 to 6 is best, no children) - the people who are concerned and who have clout with him or her. Only include people who are comfortable with the process.
3. Have a plan - decide who is going to say what.
4. Make all arrangements for the person to begin treatment immediately following the intervention. Know the insurance details and which hospital or treatment facility.

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5. Identify the objections you might hear from the substance user and be prepared to answer each one.
6. Decide what consequences you're prepared to follow through with if the person refuses to enter treatment. For a teenager, it might be: "We will file a petition with the court to have you placed in treatment." For a spouse: "I will no longer cover up for you," or even: "I won't remain in this relationship with you."
7. Be prepared to follow through with these consequences if treatment is refused.
8. Tell the person that you care about him or her but explain what you are concerned about. Bring a list of examples. Be truthful and clear. Example: We love you very much, but...
9. Rehearse the intervention at least once. Know your roles.
10. Get a commitment from the person that they're willing to get help and get them there immediately.

Mandating Treatment

The vast majority of people who enter substance abuse treatment do so because of external pressure. Research has shown that required, or mandated, treatment is an effective motivator. Keep in mind that involuntary treatment can work just as well as voluntary treatment.

Why would people change if they are being forced? Wouldn't they change faster if they sought treatment voluntarily? Perhaps. But by mandating treatment, people are left with a choice: enter treatment, or lose something important to them. For example:

- Individuals arrested for driving while intoxicated may be ordered by the court to attend a driver education program and receive weekly counseling to avoid jail and keep their driver's license.
- Mothers whose ability to care for their children is compromised due to substance use disorders may be required to attend treatment so their children are not placed in foster care.
- Employees found using substances on the job may be required to attend substance abuse treatment or lose their job.

The threat of losing important relationships, good health, or reputation may motivate some to enter treatment, even if they are not enthusiastic about doing so. For this reason, the person in need should clearly hear that friends and family members will lose trust, respect, and even regular contact if the substance use continues.

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What About Requiring Abstinence?

Some families tell the person to stop all drinking and drug use. However, complying can be difficult - uncontrollable alcohol or other drug craving, seeking, and use is the hallmark of addiction. If you decide to give an ultimatum, require treatment, not abstinence. People who engage in treatment will be better able to achieve abstinence, because they will be given the medical attention and emotional support they need to maintain abstinence over the long term.

What About People Who Recover Without Going to Treatment?

While treatment is not absolutely necessary for recovery, a person's ability to recover without treatment varies widely. Some people use prayer, self-help groups, active church participation, the power of example, or a very supportive employer or group of friends to recover. Others don't have the same network or life philosophy. A health care professional or substance use counselor will be able to help you make treatment decisions.

What If My Loved One Relapses?

Since addiction is a chronic disease, relapses do occur. If this happens, don't lose hope. A relapse doesn't mean that the person isn't trying, or that his/her recovery is "failing." The majority of people with addictions who are in recovery suffer at least one relapse along the way.

If relapse occurs, get back in touch with the professional or self-help group that you've worked with in the past, and prepare to intervene again. But remember, ultimately you are not in control of whether your loved one stays in recovery. You can only control how you react to his or her behavior - and how you conduct your own life.

Intervention Resources

For more information about formal interventions, or to find someone who can help you, contact The National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence National Intervention Network at 1-800-654-4619 or www.ncadd.org/programs/nin/index.html or the Intervention Resource Center at 1-888-421-4321 or www.interventioninfo.org.

For more on informal interventions, visit our [Helping Others with a Problem](#) section.

Find out more about [Treatment](#) and [Recovery](#).

[Sources: Mary Ann Amodeo, Ph.D., Join Together, Herbert D. Kleber, M.D., and "Moyers on Addiction: How to Approach an Intervention" by Donna Boundy, from the companion web site to the 5 part PBS series [MOYERS ON ADDICTION: CLOSE TO HOME](#) Used with permission.]