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Become the Expert on You

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Marc Storr has a professional and academic background in Counselling, Personal Development, Applied Psychology, Research, and social care.

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How to have a problem-solving conversation when you are concerned about someone

When we are faced a problem in life, it can be hard to know what to do. However, when we are faced a family member or friend with a problem, it can feel impossible to sort out.

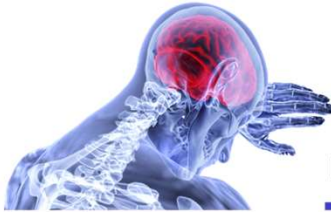
We often don't know what to do or what to say and we certainly don't want to cause more problems by sticking our oar in when all it might do is cause more waves. All is not lost though...with a simple and empathic approach, you can show that you care enough to be concerned but also keep the conversation short enough to avoid becoming overly involved.

Below is a useful way of structuring the conversation. It follows eight easy steps and you just need to be clear and precise (being vague just leads to confusion) and be willing to do whatever you agree to (therefore keep it realistic).

Aim for around 20 mins for this type of conversation and embed it in a longer conversation to include a warm-up and warm-down period. For the purposes of this article, we'll use a conversation between you and a friend as an example but the approach can be used with anyone that we are concerned about

Remember, there is a fine line between 'lecturing' and 'discussing' and it's a discussion you're after. The main difference between the two is that a 'lecture' comes from an all-knowing position and usually seeks to persuade the other person whereas a discussion is about giving a personal opinion and the other person can then make an informed choice.

In addition, by having a discussion, you are more likely to be able to get all of your concerns across, leaving the other with the knowledge that other people have noticed their issues. This feeling of being noticed by others can often make a change in itself without any further intervention.



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1. Preparation

You'll find it useful to rehearse any discussion you plan to have with your friend and make a short list (no more than 10 points - but at least 5) of points that you'd like to cover. This rehearsal will make you feel more comfortable when you are having the real conversation. Again, rehearsing the conversation helps you to follow the steps and makes you aware of what you're willing to get involved in (as well as what you want to avoid). Making a list of points will help you remember why it is you wanted to talk in the first place.

2. Opening the conversation

Always start with a soft opener that involves a few throw-away lines about anything thing that is relevant. If it's a nice day, mention the weather. If there has been some noteworthy news, talk about it. This should take no longer than 5 mins and acts like a sort of warm-up before the real work – just remember to keep it positive and don't talk about anything depressing or annoying.

You: "How's things man, enjoying the weather? I've been out and about for the last couple of days because it's just too good to stay in"

3. Setting the scene

After you have opened the conversation, gently move into the start of the conversation you want to have by developing some context. For this next part stick with a simple *feedback sandwich* – start with a positive, end with a positive and sandwich the negative issue in between.

For example, you could say

You: "You know, I've always admired you ability to stick with life no matter what it throws at you. I know you're resilient and I know you're strong. (positive)

Sandwich filling.....

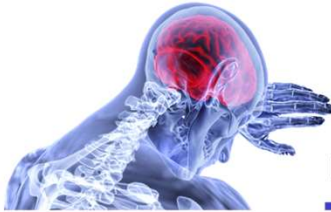
I have to say though, I'm a little concerned about the amount you've been drinking recently. I know you've missed a few days off work and I just want to check out whether things are ok. (negative)

Sandwich filling.....

I know you can look after yourself and, if I know you, I think you'll be more aware of what's going on than I am. However, I know myself that we all need a little help sometimes and I was just wondering whether this was one of those times for you." (positive)

4. Permission

After you have used the feedback sandwich, get permission to begin the conversation in earnest. Permission is really important because your friend



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needs to agree to the conversation to ensure that they join in and to allow you to get your point across. You really want your friend to buy into what you are saying and get some kind of investment from them – this is highly unlikely to occur if you don't get their permission first.

You: "Can we talk about what I'm thinking about? I would like to let you know why it is I'm concerned and get your opinion about it, it won't take too long and I promise not to get all heavy."

Structured conversation

The steps are progressive and need to be followed one after the other to ensure coherence and consistency. In addition, each step provides information to be discussed in the next step. Therefore, don't move on until you have completed each step.

5. Does the person see their behaviour as a problem?

Here you're looking at whether your friend thinks their behaviour is impacting on their life. Sometimes we fail to see how our behaviour affects our lives and the lives of others and an external injection of reality can help us to reassess what we're doing and why.

You: "You know the last time I came around, remember it was 11:30 in the morning, and you we're still drunk from the night before. Remember, you had to take a day off work. I think, on its own, I wouldn't think too much about it. But, I came around the next day after that and you were still off work, and still drunk. From the outside, it seems like you're drinking a lot, and I just wondered what you thought about it."

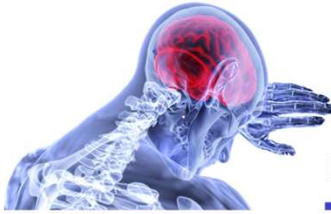
The conversation is likely to go one of two ways at this point. Your friend will either understand your concerns (and may even agree with you) or will seek to play down what you are saying (and may even disagree with you).

5a. If your friend agrees

If your friend agrees with you, ask them about how they feel and let them talk. Use the information they give to form new questions that you can ask.

Friend: "I know, I did hit it hard the other week there. It was about 2 or 3 days in a row that I just got hammered. Work is rubbish and I got a big bill for my car and I just got down about things, you know what its like."

You: "Yeh, I do, life's like that sometimes isn't it. Things are ok for a while and then you get caught off-guard. How long has work been rubbish?"



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Friend: “For ages man. It’s just getting worse and worse, so I’m getting up in the morning dreading work, I’m having a garbage time while I’m there, and then I come home and I just dread going back in the next day. It just stresses you out, you know.”

5b. If your friend disagrees

That’s their prerogative. You can’t force someone to change – if you do, you’ll just force them away.

Friend: “Nah, everything’s ok man. What have you got on today?”

You: “Not much man, I’ve set aside some time to come and see you. If you say everything’s ok, then I won’t push it. But...if I’m honest, it wasn’t just last week that I’ve been concerned about. Remember last month, when you had no money but you’d only just been paid. I know that you were out every night and that’s expensive to keep up. It seems like you spent all your money on drinking and didn’t leave enough for, like, normal life.”

Remember, keep it positive and not too punitive – it’s about getting your friend to see that you’re concerned and not about forcing them to change. The positive angle at this stage is really about you showing your friend that life sometimes goes a little awry, and that this is normal and understandable. If people see their behaviour as understandable given the circumstances, they are less likely to blame themselves which would only provide more obstacles to changing their behaviour.

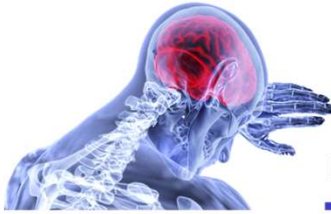
If at this stage your friend really digs their heels in, don’t push it too far. Remember what we discussed above about being aware that someone is taking an interest in our behaviour can actually serve to change our behaviour. In addition, if you push it too far at this stage, this will make it hard for you to bring it up again later if you need to.

If, as the conversation progresses, your friend begins to accept that there *may* be a problem, slowly progress onto the next stage. Again, use the information that you are given, and use their words if possible.

6. How significant is the problem

Here you are looking at the extent to which their behaviour is impacting on their life and whether this is important to the person.

You: “Work sounds bad and it sounds like you can’t get away from that feeling. Are you drinking to help you switch off?”



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Friend: "Yeh, it just takes your mind off it doesn't it and helps you deal with the stress."

You: "Yeh, there's nothing wrong with a little emotion-focused coping every now and then. Does it help you deal with the stress though because it sounds like you're just as stressed the next day anyway?"

When you get to this stage, your friend is unlikely to disagree with you as long as you keep using their information (and words) where possible and keep the problem linked to the circumstances rather than some kind of deficit in your friend.

From here, you can progress to the next stage by asking about what can be done to change the circumstances. The theory here is that if you change the circumstances, you change the stress. If you change the stress, there is less to cope with and vis-à-vis less of a need for an emotion-focused coping mechanism like drinking. It also helps to keep your focus positive because you are talking about removing something that causing problems (the stress) rather than removing something that is helping someone to cope (the drinking).

7. Does your friend want to change?

Here you are looking at your friend's motivation to change and helping them to develop and *intention* to change.

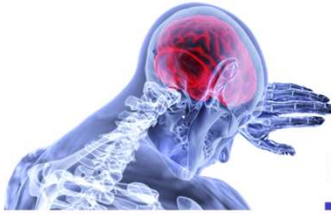
You: "What are you planning to do to sort things out?"

Friend: "I dunno, look for another job I suppose"

Sometimes motivation needs to be built. This is highly likely to be the case if it is a situation where you have approached your friend rather than them asking for help. However, we're not talking about building Rome, so a good level of motivation can be built fairly quickly and you should definitely look towards developing some in the current conversation. Motivation is fairly easy to develop; the key is to transform the motivation into some form of action and to maintain the action long enough for it become rewarding in its own sense.

You: "Sounds like a good idea, I could do with doing that myself. I'm guessing if you get something you enjoy you won't be as stressed as you have been"

Friend: "Yeh, it's be nice just to come home without a load of baggage, you know, and not feel like I just want to hide"



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8. Does your friend feel that they can change?

Here you are looking at your friend's beliefs around their ability to change. This is all about something called self-efficacy and if your friend wants to change but feels that they 'can't', change is unlikely.

You: "How easy is it going to be to get another job?"

Friend: "I dunno, there's not much about at the minute. Then there are the applications and the interviews, and I'm terrible at interviews."

You: "I could help with filling in the forms and doing some interview prep if you like?"

Also, at this stage, it isn't just about being able to change concrete areas of life such as getting a job. It is also about finding other ways to cope with the inevitable stresses that life throws at us. Your friend's job is unlikely to change anytime soon, but they need to get a grip on their drinking now. So keep your focus on two elements – concrete change and abstract change.

Concrete change relates to things you can see, such as a new job. Abstract change relates to things you can't see, such as doing some exercise. Therefore, along with helping the person to change the circumstances that are causing the stress, also help to them to find better ways of coping with the stress that is already there.

You: "What about coming to gym with me tomorrow, I usually go around 5:30 but I'll wait for you finish work if you like – could even get a taster session for free I think. We're also having a barbecue this weekend, why don't you come along"

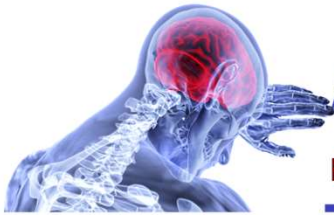
Friend: "Oh, I dunno about the gym. The Barbie sounds ok though, what time?"

Obviously, for the purposes of brevity, I've only included a few lines of conversation and a successful full conversation is likely to be 100 times as long. At the end of the conversation, you should be aiming for a real positive outcome, with real ways of changing being found. There should be hope for a better future, both of you should be motivated, and the conversation should end on a pleasant high.

Be prepared though. If you are concerned enough to have this type of conversation to start off with, you should be concerned enough to be involved in helping the other person to change. You will come away with some kind of involvement – otherwise, it would just be the type of conversation where you have criticised someone's life and then left them to it.

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Clearly, you can see from above that open questions are important - you are looking to involve the other person in a realistic two-way conversation not just tell them a bunch of stuff - this way you might learn something yourself. The whole goal is to open the dialogue and raise the awareness of everyone involved - sometimes this is all you can do initially. Keep the structure of the above but change the words so that they feel more comfortable and normal for you – this way, they will flow more easily.

An extra bit about proximity

The closer the person is to you, or the more impact their behaviour has on you, the more you have a right to say that the person's behaviour needs to change. At this stage, although you may feel like ditching your partner/son/friend and leaving them to it, this would be counter-productive. However, you do have a right (as well as an obligation to yourself) to lay down the law regarding what you want and what you feel will get in the way. The reality is that the behaviour of someone close to you will impact on you as well as them and this needs to be accounted for by both of you.

There won't be a light at the end of the tunnel for either of you unless you and the other have a clear agreement about what you are both going to do to deal with this situation and the nature of any future relationship you intend to have. The light in this case will be the agreed end goal for you both whatever this may be. However, you can get yourself a torch right now by beginning this process of discussion and clearly stating what you are willing to put up with and what you will not tolerate, and how the other's behaviour affects your relationship together.

Be very clear about what you want but be willing to compromise because nobody gets everything they want. Don't forget to cover the bit about what will happen if either of you breaks the agreement you come to - things can be revisited at any time, but only as long as you both agree to it. If one person breaks the agreement without discussion, there has to be consequences and it is better to decide on these before the event as they are then more likely to be realistic and will have been agreed and expected by all.

Above all else, remember that your priority is you – if you can't look after yourself, you're not going to be able to help someone else.