

Alcohol and drug problems happen in all kinds of families

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Dealing with any problem is easier if you have family members to offer love, support and advice during difficult times. But there are some situations where even the most loving and resourceful families need help to cope. Drug and alcohol problems are a good example.

Some people think these problems only affect certain sorts of families. But they affect all kinds of families from all communities and religions. They affect people like Carla, a 48-year-old teacher, who gets up early every day to drive to the boarding house where her 22-year-old son Tony lives, wake him up and take him to work. If she doesn't, Tony, a heavy cannabis user, will never wake up on time and will lose his job.

Doing this five days a week is hard on Carla - it takes so long to wake Tony that she's sometimes late for work herself. She also has to be secretive about what she does because if her husband finds out what she's doing he'll be angry. He already blames her for their son's drug problem. "Maybe if you'd been stricter with him when he was younger, he wouldn't be like this," he's always saying.

Eventually Carla saw a drug and alcohol counsellor at the local community health centre. It was the first time Carla had had an opportunity to talk about how this problem was affecting her, and this made her feel much better. The counsellor also helped by talking to Carla about other ways in which she could help her son.

Many people think the Australian practice of discussing personal problems with counsellors is strange. They don't see how talking to a stranger can help. Yet, as Carla discovered,

talking to someone outside the family can often help you see things differently and help you find new ways to deal with problems.

Sometimes people feel too ashamed to talk to someone outside the family, especially about problems concerning alcohol or illicit drugs. But hiding a drug problem, whether it's alcohol, tranquillisers, heroin, or any other drug, allows drug use to continue and become more serious for both the user and their family. Drug and alcohol problems are also health problems and - like many other health problems - may need the help of a health professional.

If you talk to a counsellor or other health professional about a problem, that person isn't allowed to release any information about you to anyone (apart from other health workers who may also be involved). There are strict rules forbidding them from saying anything to other people, including family members. The same strict rules apply to interpreters. If you ask for an interpreter to be present and then realise the interpreter is someone you know, you can request another interpreter.

Drug and alcohol services can help in many different ways - by providing information, counselling or treatment or referring you to another service. If you need help, call your local community health centre and find out what help is available. If you call during a busy time and there's no one to help you immediately, always leave your phone number so they can call you back, or ring again.

For more information about drug and alcohol services, call the Drug and Alcohol Multicultural Education Centre on (02) 9699 3552.