

# Walking a Tightrope

## Alcohol and other drug use and violence: A guide for families



### Alcohol- and Other Drug-related Violence

Alcohol and other drug use and family violence often occur together. Families already coping with a family member who uses alcohol and drugs can also be exposed to violent behaviours.

Living with a family member who uses alcohol or other drugs and who is violent can be frightening. It can feel like walking a tightrope. Specialist support and medical attention may be helpful.

This guide may also help you develop strategies to take care of yourself and your family.

## Violent behaviours

Violence has many forms. It can be verbal, physical, social, financial or psychological. It may be a crime.

Violence may include:

- slapping, pushing, hair pulling, punching, kicking, choking, holding someone down
- threats, yelling, swearing, bullying or starting fights
- name calling, criticising or put downs
- financial or social control
- forcing someone to do anything against their will
- using weapons, breaking things
- threatening or harming children, pets or others.

Behaviour which makes you feel afraid for your safety is not reasonable. It can stop you feeling safe and impact on the wellbeing and health of you, your children, family and friends.

## Why some people use violence

There is no such thing as a 'typical' person who uses violence. People who use violence may:

- use it to control others
- sometimes believe they have the right to get their own way despite harming others
- use it to inappropriately express frustration or stress
- not take responsibility for and make excuses about their violence: e.g., blaming alcohol or stress
- claim to 'lose control' when angry around their families, but control their anger around others
- minimise, blame others for, justify or deny their use of violence, or the impact it has on others

Alcohol and other drug use may affect the way someone understands and reacts to situations or people. This may increase the risk of violent behaviour. No matter the reason, violence is never acceptable. Don't take responsibility for someone else's use of violence, take responsibility for your safety and seek help.



## Impacts of violence

Violence may have short or long term impacts on the user, their families and friends. People subjected to violence may feel unsafe and powerless to change their situation. They may feel a lack of control. They are more likely to develop problems with anxiety, depression or stress.

Children subjected to or witnessing violence may develop problems with their school work, concentration and behaviour. They may act in violent ways, think about or attempt suicide or self-harm, get involved with crime, and/or use alcohol or other drugs themselves. Violence towards pregnant women may cause a miscarriage or affect the way children develop after birth.

## Common responses to violence

It is very common for people dealing with a family member's alcohol and other drug problems, especially if they also use violence, to have feelings of powerlessness, self-blame, shame, guilt, embarrassment, anger, fear, hopelessness, confusion, exhaustion and a lack of control.

## Communicating with someone who uses Alcohol or Other Drugs and is violent

If a family member begins to show unusual mood swings or behaviours, talk honestly, openly and calmly with them about your concerns. The following tips may help:

- time your conversations carefully. Do not try to discuss issues when they have been drinking or using drugs
- try to avoid an argument if they are already angry
- when everyone is calm, listen and try to understand what is going on for each other
- avoid criticising, judging, moralising and blaming; they will be less likely to listen to you
- focus on the behaviour not the person
- use "I" or "We" statements, rather than "YOU" statements. For example:

*"I get worried when drugs have been used because I feel threatened and afraid."*

**rather than:** *"You come in high on drugs, throwing your weight around and threatening everybody. You need to wake up to yourself."*

- offer support and love
- set rules together and be clear about consequences if they are broken.

Supporting a person does not mean you accept their alcohol or other drug use or violence.

The Family Drug Support website ([www.fds.org.au](http://www.fds.org.au)) has further resources on "Setting Effective Boundaries" and "Dealing with Conflict".

## Dealing with violent behaviours

- **NEVER CONFRONT** someone whilst they are intoxicated
- **BE AWARE** that alcohol and other drugs can affect the way people think and interpret situations
- **AVOID HEATED ARGUMENTS** and try to stay calm
- **AVOID ARGUMENTS** in areas of the house (kitchen, bathroom, garage) where there may be things that can be used as weapons
- **BE AWARE OF EXITS** - do not block their exit or back yourself or them into a corner
- **LEAVE** if the situation is no longer safe and you can go safely
- **TRY** to keep everyone safe, especially children.

## Make a Safety Plan

Developing a safety plan can help to reduce you and your family's exposure to alcohol and other drug use and violent behaviours. It can help you to respond in a crisis. It can be a good idea to make a safety plan if you live with a person who uses alcohol or other drugs and has been violent in the past, especially if you:

- think their behaviour is getting worse
- think their behaviour may become violent
- have experienced recent violence
- are worried the violence will happen again.

A safety plan can include:

- A list of important phone numbers in case you need to act fast. Keep this list somewhere private but where you can get to it easily. Include:



- » Police
- » Emergency housing and domestic violence services
- » Solicitors or Legal Aid
- » Local mental health crisis team, emergency medical centre or hospital
- » Someone living nearby who can help quickly
- » People to help care for children and/or animals.
- Identifying where you can go to make a phone call for help without being overheard
- Identifying somewhere safe you and your children can go such as a family member or friend's place
- Keeping important documents, bank details/cards, mobile phone where you can get to them easily.

A safety plan does not prevent a crisis but it may help in responding to crises, helping you get to safety faster.

## **If you are afraid or experiencing violence**

**In an emergency Ring 000 and ask for police. Follow the instructions of the operator.**

You have many options if you feel afraid of your family member or if they have been violent. You could:

- do nothing
- ask the person to leave
- leave the situation yourself
- ring someone to come and help you, including the police.

Each of these actions may have several consequences. Think about what could happen following each action, and which action will increase your safety and wellbeing and that of your family.

## **Calling the Police**

Calling the police sends a clear message to the family member that they have hurt or scared you and that you will do something about their violence.

The police can explain what your options are, answer your questions, and place you in contact with emergency accommodation and domestic violence services.

If the person appears to be suffering from a mental health issue the police or paramedics may remove them and arrange an assessment.

Where a criminal offence has occurred the police will usually arrest and charge the person immediately. This is best done with your support. However, in some circumstances, the police may opt to arrest, charge and prosecute the offender even if you prefer not to press charges. Their primary concerns are your safety and that of any children present, and to hold the person responsible for their actions.

Where police identify an incident as domestic violence, and children were present or involved, the police **MUST** report the matter to child welfare services.

## **Intervention orders**

Intervention orders<sup>1</sup> are orders issued by either the police or the courts. They can help to stop a person behaving in ways which may harass, threaten or abuse you and which may be violent. They are not a criminal charge, but it is a criminal offence to disobey one.

Police can provide you with advice about intervention orders and assist you to obtain one if you have grounds. An intervention order is made specifically for you and your situation to keep you safe. In some circumstances, the order can include a clause which removes the other person from your house.

## **Family members with a mental illness**

Most people with a mental illness are not violent. However, some people with a mental illness who use alcohol or other drugs may be more likely to be violent, especially if they are not getting good mental health care.

Alcohol, other drugs and mental health issues are complex and can take time, commitment and patience to resolve. Be prepared for a long process and some setbacks.

Getting support from professionals, family and friends is crucial. It can help people to get better, stay well, and remain safe.

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1 They have different names in different states and territories.



## Tips for looking after yourself

It is important to get support and look after yourself:

- Speak to your doctor or a worker at your local community health centre
- Use a counselling service
- Join a support group (e.g., Family Drug Support or similar) and talk to others in a similar situation
- Do things you enjoy that can improve your wellbeing. For example:
  - » Spend time with friends; they are very important for good mental health
  - » Exercise, eat regular healthy meals and avoid junk food
  - » Learn relaxation skills and develop a stress management plan
  - » Set realistic goals
  - » Take it one step at a time. Change takes time
  - » Limit the time you spend with the person who is violent.

## Looking after your children

Parental alcohol- and drug-related violence harms children. The emotional and physical safety of children is the first priority when planning how to address violence in the family. Adults may be able to understand what is happening and make choices. Children tend to interpret what is happening differently to adults and may not be able to understand or make choices for themselves. Include children when making safety plans. If necessary, develop individual plans for each child. They may benefit from professional support which you can access through a GP, family support service or domestic violence service.

## Final thoughts

Improving alcohol and other drug and mental health issues takes time, effort and patience. However, you do not have to live with frightening, controlling and/or violent behaviour.

Another person's behaviour is not your responsibility. Only support them if they change their violent behaviour.

## Further Information And Support

In an **EMERGENCY** ring **000** and ask for the police



Supporting families affected by alcohol and other drugs

### Family Drug Support

National Support Line:  
**1300 368 186** (24hrs/7days)  
Website: [www.fds.org.au](http://www.fds.org.au)



### 1800 Respect

Information and support  
**1800 737 732**  
[www.1800respect.org.au](http://www.1800respect.org.au)

#### Your Local service details:

Disclaimer: This pamphlet provides information of a general nature only, and identifies strategies that have been helpful for other families. It is not a substitute for specific professional advice. It is not appropriate for all situations and cultures. Laws vary in jurisdictions; seek advice from support organisations listed above.



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