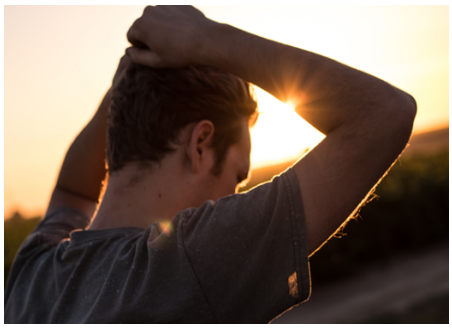
Positive Choices
Drug and Alcohol Information
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Factsheet

Drug use and aggression: How to protect yourself



Evidence ratings:

This resource has undergone expert review. See our Help/Q&A section for more details.

Year:

Targeted Drugs: Drugs (General)

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What should I do if someone is becoming aggressive?

Using drugs can increase **paranoid** and **irrational thoughts**, **mood swings**, and **irritability,** amongst many other side effects. Although most people who use drugs will not become violent or aggressive, some people can show unusual and unpredictable behaviours.

When a person is **intoxicated,** or in early stages of withdrawal from a drug, they may not be able to follow directions easily. Aggression is not a common side effect from drugs, but if people do become aggressive this increases the risk of harm to themselves and others. If this is happening to a young person in your care, it is important to protect yourself, and to try to limit the physical harm the young person can do to themselves and others.

If someone becomes violent and aggressive, here are some steps to take:

- **Try to remain calm, and speak in a calm, clear, and slow voice to the person.** Try to avoid emotional or hostile language, which may make the person more aggressive. Say the person's name, and tell them that you're there to help. For example, "*I can see how upset and angry you are right now,* [person's name]. *I don't mean to upset you, I care about you, and I just want to help you.*" Other options include "*how can I help you feel safe?*", "*your behaviour is scaring me at the moment, and I'd really like to help.*"
- Use an 'open' body stance: arms open, palms up, head lowered.
- Give the person some physical space to minimise their feelings of confinement. If possible, remove furniture or objects that the person might use agressively. Turn down the lights as this may calm them down. Explain what you are doing, e.g., "*I am just moving some things out of your way, so that you don't hurt yourself.*"
- Give the person time to think and respond. Slow things down as much as possible. When they speak, listen to what they say, and show them you understand e.g., '*that must be really upsetting*" or "*if that happened to me, I'd feel the same way*".
- If the behaviour intensifies, **give the person a choice to help them feel like they are still in control.** For example, "*if you continue like this, I'll have to leave and call the police. But if you calm down, maybe we can find another way to help.*"

If at any stage you feel like you need to leave, do so. Call the police (000) for help, and remove yourself from the situation. This is especially the case if your exit is blocked, if the person is already too hostile, unstable, fearful, or intoxicated to respond to you, is threatening you or others, or has a weapon.

For information about violence and aggression associated with ice (methamphetamine) use, visit the *Cracks in the Ice* information portal.

How should I respond after an aggressive incident?

Following a violent or aggressive incident, you may be feeling a range of emotions that might include anger, resentment, shock, extreme sadness, and worry. You may also feel like you have to calm the person down from now on, or avoid them altogether, so as to minimise the chance of future aggression. These are legitimate and normal reactions to such a situation. You might also need some support to help you in the aftermath. You can refer to the Starting the Conversation factsheet for some ideas on how to address the issue with an individual, once the effects of intoxication or withdrawal have diminished.

- Firstly, it is important to **choose a time when the person is not intoxicated** and when everyone is at their calmest.
- **Be assertive** in what you would like to say and allow the other person to talk about what has been happening for them.
- Target the conversation towards the person's actions, rather than the individual themselves. **Use "I" rather than "you" statements** e.g. "I feel scared by what happened".
- **Set rules and boundaries** together regarding the individual's behaviour and be clear about the consequences of breaking these.

Making a safety plan

If you are concerned about the possibility of a loved one becoming violent or aggressive due to their use of alcohol or other drugs, it is important to have a safety plan. This will help you to respond to crises and get to safety faster. **Important aspects of a safety plan include:**

- **A list of important phone numbers in case you need to act fast.** This may include the phone numbers for emergency services (000), emergency housing and domestic violence services, legal aid, your local hospital or emergency medical centres, a neighbour or friend who lives nearby and someone who can help to care for any children or animals. Keep this list somewhere private, but easily accessible.
- **Identifying a place where you can go to make a phone call** without being overheard.
- **Identifying somewhere safe where you and any loved ones can go if needed.** This may be a family member's or friend's house.
- **Keeping important documents, identification, bank details/cards and your mobile phone where you can get to them easily.**

Evidence Base

This information has been adapted from the "Walking a Tightrope" pamphlet developed by NCETA and Family Drug Support. To view the full pamphlet, please click here.

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