SUPPORTING SOMEONE THROUGH DETOX

Withdrawal from a drug is called detoxification (detox) and is part of the recovery process. It is important not to see this step as a pass-or-fail test.

Home detoxification is not recommended for every drug, and it is not really the best choice when a person is taking several drugs together e.g. tranquillisers, alcohol and other drugs.

Symptoms
Withdrawal symptoms will be mild or severe, depending on:
• The kind of drug used on the journey, it can be hard
• How long the drug has been used for.

When the person stops using the drug, the body and mind take time to readjust physically, emotionally and mentally. This takes time for both the physical body and the mind to readjust. The person is also probably not going to be thinking very clearly. Some typical symptoms will be:
• Sweaty and hot, and then get cold and have chicken skin (goosebumps)
• Showing signs and symptoms of a cold e.g.: runny eyes and nose and sneezing
• Grumpy, irritable and anxious
• Tired and not having much energy
• Often showing changes in their mood – one minute they feel okay, the next they feel depressed
• Sometimes they may say they can’t go on – this is quite normal

Help to distract and reassure the person with any cravings they may have. Encourage them to use the list of D’s listed below:
• Do an activity e.g. watch a video, play cards, listen to music
• Delay - suggest and encourage them to put off the decision to give up on detox, for at least an hour.
• Drink plenty - especially water
• Discuss and remind them to look at their reasons for stopping
• Do some gentle exercise and do this with them e.g. go for a walk, do some stretching exercises, yoga, Tai Chi, and encourage them to ease aches and pains by having warm baths or spas.

Lapses after detox
A lapse may raise a lot of fear for families. You may have just started to relax, breathing a sigh of relief, believing the drug problem is all sorted out and the chaos is over. It is important to understand that a lapse is part of the recovery process. The key to your family member getting through a lapse is having support and encouragement to get back on track. The experience of a lapse can often clarify for them what they have already learnt about recovery, and highlight areas that may be their triggers and where they need extra support or coping strategies.

It is our attitude and responses that are important. If a lapse is seen as a crisis or a failure, rather than as a common detox experience, it can have a negative and damaging impact on the user.

Don’t forget they have taken a big step forward in attempting treatment and should always be praised, even if things do not go as planned.

As a support person, it is important to be positive, calm and create a safe atmosphere in the home. You need to remember that you can be a powerful influence for change in your family. You know the person and will — with a bit of preparation — be able to help. Spending time with the person, particularly during the first week of symptoms, may require re-organising your usual schedule.

It is useful to have a professional assessment to check if home detox is the best choice first, and to organise for a doctor or drug and alcohol worker to provide advice. Detoxes from drugs like alcohol or benzodiazepines can be dangerous and may need careful medical supervision. Contact the intake worker at the detox centre nearest you for information on how to arrange an assessment.

Your support role in home detox
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If you end up helping someone in their home it can be good to have others with who you can give you some time-out. Remember you can phone the FDS line for support at any time 24 hours, seven days a week.

You will need to encourage drug-using friends of the person from visiting them during this time, and keep people away who may cause stress or arguments. If your family member has a home detox support worker they will be able to assist you and answer any questions you may have, either by phone or when they visit.

If the person begins fitting, experiences chest pain, becomes unconscious, hallucinates or has other worrying symptoms, call an ambulance immediately dial 000.