



OVER THE EDGE

What Should We Do When Alcohol and Drug Use Become a Problem to Society?

The evidence is clear: alcohol and drugs, when abused, are taking a heavy toll on our health, safety, productivity, and economy. History has proven that it's a problem with no easy solution.

During the dialogue, we will consider different perspectives on what to do when alcohol and drug use negatively impact society. Our task is to weigh the advantages and drawbacks of different approaches to the issue.

Here are descriptions of the options you can use to introduce the issue guide:

OPTION ONE: Keep People Safe

According to this option, the main problem is that substance abuse threatens our safety and well-being. This option says we need to tightly regulate and control the production and use of alcohol and drugs, impose fair punishments for people who break the rules, and assure treatment for those who need it.

OPTION TWO: Address Conditions that Foster Substance Abuse

This view says we must recognize the critical role society plays regarding how and why people use drugs and alcohol, and that it is our shared responsibility to change the social, cultural, and economic conditions that foster widespread substance use and abuse.

OPTION THREE: Uphold Individual Freedom

This approach says that we must respect people's freedom while offering them the means to act responsibly. We should provide the information and accessible treatment options people need to make their own choices and reform laws that are intrusive or unfair.

NATIONAL ISSUES FORUMS

Why are we here? What are we going to do?

We are here to move toward a public decision on a difficult issue through **choice work**.

How do we do that?

We do that by engaging in a deliberative dialogue in which we:

- understand the **pros** and **cons** of each option—its benefits, drawbacks, and trade-offs.
- know the **strategic facts** and how they affect the way the group thinks about each option.
- get beyond the initial positions people hold to their deeper motivations—the things they consider to be the most valuable in everyday life.
- weigh carefully the views of others and appreciate the impact various options would have on what others consider valuable.
- **work through** the conflicting emotions that arise when various options pull and tug on what people consider valuable.

KINDS OF FORUMS

Many NIF groups choose to organize single forums around issues of concern in their communities. Most single forums last two to two-and-a-half hours.

Other groups, however, plan for multiple sessions or study circles to allow participants greater opportunity to examine issues in depth. Some groups set aside time for two meetings while others might devote a separate session to each option. And still others plan ahead for a session after the forum for participants to come back together and consider next steps.

In some communities, people begin their examination of an issue in a large-group forum and then break off into smaller groups for subsequent sessions. The reverse is also helpful—starting in small groups and culminating in a larger community forum.

National Issues Forums are about encouraging public deliberation. The needs of your community will drive the schedule in which deliberation can best occur.

STAGES OF A FORUM

Welcome

The convenor or moderator introduces the NIF program.

Ground rules

Participants and the moderator review desired outcomes and agree on ground rules.

Getting started

One good way to start is for participants to take a few minutes to talk about their personal experiences with the issue and tell their stories. Sometimes the convenor or moderator begins by showing a starter video that reviews the problems underlying the issue.

Deliberation

Participants examine all the options. An approximately equal amount of time should be spent on each option.

Ending the forum

Participants reflect on what has been achieved.

Questionnaire

Participants complete the questionnaire.

IF THIS IS YOUR FIRST EXPERIENCE AS A MODERATOR

You don't have to be an expert on the issue.

Read the issue guide thoroughly. Consider questions that get to the heart of the issue and think through the essence of each option. This is a critical part of preparation.

Stay focused on what the forum is about—deliberation.

Ask questions that probe the underlying motivations of each option, the trade-offs it might require, and the willingness of the participants to recognize them. (Sample questions begin on Page 5.) Listen to others; remain neutral.

Keep the discussion moving and focused on the issue.

Sometimes it's difficult to move on to another option when there is so much more that could be said. But in order to make progress, participants need time to weigh all the major options fairly. Be mindful of the time.

Reserve ample time for reflections on the forum.

In many ways, this is the most important work the group will do. The moderator will provide reminders that time is passing, but it is up to all the participants to help preserve the time to reflect on what they have said and what they might want to do about it.

COMMON GROUND RULES

Before the deliberation begins, it is important for participants to review guidelines for their discussion. Groups often use ground rules such as these:

- everyone is encouraged to participate,
- no one or two individuals should dominate,
- the discussion should focus on the options,
- all the major options should be considered fairly,
- they will maintain an open and respectful atmosphere for the discussion, and
- they will listen to each other.

ENDING A FORUM: REFLECTIONS

Before ending a forum, take time to reflect, both individually and as a group, on what has been achieved. Consider the following kinds of questions:

I. Individual reflections

How has your thinking about the issue changed?

How has your thinking about other people's views changed?

How has your perspective changed as a result of what you heard in this forum?

II. Group reflections

What didn't we work through?

Can we identify any shared sense of purpose or direction?

Which trade-offs are we willing to make to move in a shared direction?

Which are we unwilling to make?

III. Next-step reflections

What do we still need to talk about?

How can we use what we learned about ourselves in this forum?

Do we want to meet again?

OVER THE EDGE

What Should We Do
When Alcohol and Drug Use
Become a Problem to Society?

HERE ARE SOME QUESTIONS YOU CAN USE TO START THE DELIBERATION

As you examine this issue together you will undoubtedly think of questions that are at the heart of what makes the issue compelling. In some forums, certain questions might arise that could derail the deliberation by veering into partisan political debate. It will be important to remember that, as a group, you are dealing with broader underlying concerns that are not defined by party affiliation and that your work here is to dig down to the basic values that define us as human beings and as Americans, rather than as liberals and conservatives. It is helpful to consider, ahead of time, broad questions that need to be addressed in each option. Here are some questions you can use to start the deliberation:

OPTION ONE: KEEP PEOPLE SAFE

- Aggressively enforcing strict drug laws will necessarily increase prison populations. Is this a reasonable trade-off when weighed against greater public safety? What might be the consequences of more incarceration?
- Thirty-one states have social-host liability laws that hold adults responsible if they allow underage drinking on their watch. Do you believe this will actually reduce underage drinking? What negative consequences could such laws have?
- Several states have legalized the sale and use of marijuana for recreational purposes. Do you believe these states are putting the public at greater risk?
- Do you favor drug testing in the workplace? What consequences—either negative or positive—do you think could come from such testing?

OPTION TWO: ADDRESS CONDITIONS THAT FOSTER SUBSTANCE ABUSE

- Can you think of instances where the use of alcohol or drugs is glamorized or encouraged? Would regulating access to positive messages about substance use infringe too much on the rights of individuals and businesses?
- Do you believe that putting more funds toward addressing unemployment and poverty would reduce the numbers of people in disadvantaged communities who abuse substances? What responsibility do individuals have for controlling their use of drugs and alcohol?
- Do you think advertising leads to the over-use of prescription and legal narcotic drugs? What would the drawbacks be if we banned this type of advertising?
- By promoting alcohol-free activities and reducing sponsorship by alcohol manufacturers, some colleges have reportedly reduced their campus alcohol violations. But some argue that without money from sponsors, recreational and sporting events would be difficult to fund. How should colleges come to terms with these trade-offs?

OPTION THREE: UPHOLD INDIVIDUAL FREEDOM

- Many people believe that less harmful substances, like marijuana, should be legalized, and that individuals should be allowed to make their own decisions on what substances to use. What are the trade-offs of having such freedom? What would the economic advantages and disadvantages be for communities?
- If drug sentencing laws are relaxed in favor of increased access to treatment programs, how likely is it that individuals will use such programs? Would individuals with substance-abuse problems seek out treatment programs without the threat of jail time?
- Who should bear the responsibility for extensively testing the long-term effects of legal drugs that are widely promoted by pharmaceutical companies? Would you be in favor or spending more government money overseeing such research? What would the trade-offs be?
- Should people be allowed to make their own choices about most drugs, even if some people make poor choices?

In addition, these questions are provided at the end of each option to encourage people to talk about how the option applies to their own community:

- What are we currently doing in our community that exemplifies this option?
- What more could we be doing, as individuals, businesses, community organizations, and public agencies?
- What are the drawbacks or trade-offs of this option for our community?

QUESTIONNAIRES

Questionnaires play an important role in your local forum—and in the national NIF network. Filled out after the forum, they serve multiple purposes. They give participants an opportunity to reconsider their views in light of the experience they have just had and give them a chance to add to what was said or heard in the forum.

The questionnaires also serve a vital role outside the forum. As one means of capturing what happened in the forum, they provide information that can be used to communicate participants' views to others—to officeholders, to the media, and to other citizens.

A national report on the outcomes of the forums on a given issue is produced each year, based on extensive interviews with moderators and the questionnaires that forums generate. Some communities use questionnaires as part of the reports they generate on the outcomes of local forums.

Please return completed questionnaires to the National Issues Forums Institute, 100 Commons Road, Dayton, Ohio 45459.

THE ROLE OF THE MODERATOR

- Provide an overview of the deliberation process
- Ask probing questions about what's at stake in each issue and each option
- Encourage participants to direct their questions and responses to one another
- Remain neutral

Another important job for the moderator is to fill out the Moderator Response sheet at the end of this guide and return it with the questionnaires to National Issues Forums Institute, 100 Commons Road, Dayton, Ohio 45459.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

To order issue guides or starter videos for this issue, visit **store.nifi.org**, call **1-800-600-4060**, or e-mail **info@ait.net**. Other issue guides and videos may also be ordered from this source.

For more information or to make comments, visit the National Issues Forums Institute website at **www.nifi.org** or call NIFI at **1-800-433-7834**.

To post the dates and locations of your forums, e-mail **forums@nifi.org**.

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MODERATOR RESPONSE

After the forum, please complete this brief response sheet and return it with the questionnaires from the forum to National Issues Forums Institute, 100 Commons Road, Dayton, Ohio 45459.

Moderator's Name _____

Phone _____ E-mail address _____

Date and location (state) where forum was held _____

Briefly describe the audience of your forum, including city and state, diversity, and age and number of participants.

What elements of this issue seemed most difficult for the participants?

What common concerns were most apparent?

What things did participants appear to hold most valuable as they wrestled with trade-offs? Describe.

Which trade-offs were participants most comfortable with? Describe.

Which trade-offs did the participants struggle with the most? Describe.

Did the group identify shared directions for action?

Return with questionnaires to:
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100 Commons Road, Dayton, Ohio 45459