

Check-In Tool

Having the Check-In Conversation

Setting the Stage: Initiating the Conversation

Ever feel a little funny when someone says, “We need to talk”? Yeah. Your goal is to invite the other person to talk with you informally about their risk failure without making them feel like they’re in trouble or are in a formal counseling session.

First, make sure you’re able to really engage in the conversation. You should not be preoccupied, upset about the events that occurred, or angry at the individual. If you are, let someone else have the conversation with the person.

A simple invitation is best (“Hey, I want to check in with you about what happened last night. Is now a good time to talk?”). If the person says yes, find a place where you can talk privately. Reassure the person that they are not in trouble, you aren’t going to lecture them, and you’re not upset at them.

Remember CWIC (As in, This Talk Will Be Quick!)

There are four steps to a successful check-in conversation. To help people remember the steps, we use the acronym CWIC.

Step 1: Clearly state the behavior that was observed.

Step 2: Walk the situation back to earlier choices.

Step 3: Identify the impact of the behavior.

Step 4: Confer about making different choices.

Step 1: Clearly State the Behavior that Was Observed

Begin by stating clearly and without exaggeration or judgment what you or others saw or experienced. Keep it to just a few sentences. Describing objectively what you or others observed helps to make sure you and the group member are on the same page, and it assures them that you are not there to judge them.

What you could say:

- *What do you remember from last night? Here’s what I experienced: By the end of the night, you were very drunk and couldn’t walk. A couple of other group members and I carried you back to your res hall and stayed with you for the rest of the night to make sure you were OK. You got sick three times, twice on the way back to your hall and once in your room. I’m not telling you this to make you feel bad; I just want you to know what happened.*
- *What do you remember from last night? Here’s what I saw: You were pretty drunk at the party, and you kept going outside on the lawn in front of the house and shouting loudly. Three of us tried to get you to come in and chill out so that the police wouldn’t come. When I tried to bring you inside, you yelled at me and tried to punch me. When the police showed up and were talking to a couple of us on the porch, you were shouting at them from inside the house. The party got broken up and we got a citation for Maintaining a Disorderly House. You weren’t the only rowdy person there, but you were the hardest to control. I’m not telling you this to make you feel bad; I just want you to know what happened.*

After you describe what you or others observed, check in with the person and ask if they remember what happened. If they blacked out, they may not remember much. They may need you to provide more details—for example: “That’s why you’re here and wearing your clothes from last night. We carried you back here.”

Step 2: **W**alk the Situation Back to Earlier Choices

Spend just a few moments “walking backward” from the point of failure by asking the question, “*What do you think you did that led to the situation?*”

Let the other person answer first. The question you’re really asking is: What choices did you make earlier that led you to being that intoxicated and out of control?

Walking back like this typically leads to one of the following statements:

- I drank more than I could handle (I don’t know how much is too much for me).
- I kept drinking beyond the point when I felt the effects that I wanted (I don’t know when to stop).
- I drank to the point of blackout and lost control of what I was doing.
- I didn’t make a plan for the night about what I wanted to do and how I wanted to do it; I just got drunk.

Step 3: **I**dentify the Impact of the Behavior

This step is not about blaming or judging; it’s about making sure the person makes the connection between what they did and what happened as a result of their actions. State the impacts of the person’s behavior as facts. Don’t exaggerate or embellish. *Describe two kinds of impacts:*

- The impact of the person’s behavior on themselves. For example, the person may:
 - Have gotten an injury or become ill.
 - Have received a citation or be facing judicial affairs.
 - Be dealing with a severe hangover and not be able to go to class or get work done because of it.
 - Have damaged one or more relationships. Others may be mad at the person because of something the person did or said or because they ended up intervening in the situation.
- The impact of the person’s behavior on others and/or the group. For example, the group may:
 - Be facing charges, citations, or sanctions.
 - Have a vendor or a partner that doesn’t want to participate in future group events.
 - Have had to pay to repair or replace damaged property.
 - Have suffered damage to its reputation on campus, with the university, in the neighborhood, or with a national organization.

Step 4:

Confer about Making Different Choices

Two ways to support the person to make better choices are by helping them clarify their goals and sharing with them strategies for getting what they want without the negative consequences.

You can start by asking the person: *What were you hoping to get out of the situation? What did you want to happen?*

While it may be hard for the person to answer this question, most of us want things like:

- To have other people like us and want to hang out with us.
- To feel more comfortable (or less awkward) in a new social situation.
- To have fun and let go.
- To feel comfortable enough to make a physical connection with someone or to hook up.

You may also want to ask: *How close were you to getting what you wanted out of the situation?* It may be hard for the person to admit that they didn't get what they wanted. You don't want the other person to feel like a failure, but to understand that there may be a better way to get what they want without the negative effects. If the person is able to describe what they wanted and what they got out of the experience, just listen.

You may want to share some of the misperceptions you've had about how heavy drinking would get you what you wanted. If you do so, make sure you're honest about your experiences.

The other person may insist that they had a great time and it was worth getting as intoxicated as they did. If this happens, rather than arguing, you can remind the person of the impact of their behavior on themselves and others.

Next, talk about what the person might do differently. Here you can use what you learned in Step 2 when you walked back the situation to the person's earlier choices. You can also cite some of your own "secrets to success" as examples of different choices the person could make.

What you could say:

- *So it sounds like you could do less pre-partying to help the night last longer. I tend to limit my pre-partying to one drink. That way I feel comfortable when I get to the party, and I still have some room to enjoy drinking when I'm there.*
- *One of the things I realized is that I actually have a better time when I slow down and just keep a buzz going rather than get totally wasted. What I do is stick with beer for the majority of the night, or if I'm drinking hard alcohol, I hold onto my cup with something still in it so that everyone knows I'm drinking, and I don't have to keep downing more drinks. It slows me down, and I have a much better time now at parties.*
- *Sounds like you probably want to be more careful with flavored vodka—maybe pay more attention to how much you're drinking and try to space it out a bit.*
- *One of the things I realized pretty quickly when I started partying is that I have to be careful doing shots. I actually try to avoid being with a group that wants to do shots, because it just messes me up and I never have as much fun. I used to think I had to prove myself by drinking as many shots as everybody else, but it just messed me up. No one liked me more when I got really drunk.*
- *You may **not** want to tell everyone before a party that you plan to get wasted. That way, you won't feel the pressure to drink so much. I know for me, people got tired of hearing me say stuff like that.*

Remind the person that there are a lot of ways to get the most out of partying with others without letting things get out of hand—strategies like eating before drinking, staying aware of how much alcohol you have over time, spacing out your drinks, and avoiding pressure to drink just because others are drinking heavily.

At this point, ask the other person: *What do you think? What do you want to do differently next time?*

It's very important that the other person be the one to decide what they will do in the future. Don't expect the person to do what you would do.

There are no wrong answers to this question. It's OK if the person says "Nothing" or "I don't know." The decision has to be theirs, and chances are they'll think about their choices even if they aren't comfortable sharing their decision with you. Just remind the person that if they keep doing the same thing, they're likely to have the same outcome or possibly more serious outcomes.

It is not your job to talk the person into making changes. Stay focused on helping them become aware of what happened, what the impacts were, why it happened, and what other choices they could make that might lead to different outcomes.

Ending the Conversation

Every good conversation has an ending. This is an opportunity to affirm any decisions the person has come to, reaffirm your friendship, and express your appreciation for the interaction. You don't want the person to walk away feeling defensive, guilty, or anxious about their status with you or the group. Tell them that you are glad the two of you had the conversation, you appreciate their honesty, and you look forward to seeing them meet with more positive outcomes in the future. Confirm any decisions they have made without adding any demands or expectations.

What you could say:

Well, thanks. I'm glad we had the chance to talk. We really like having you in the group and I care about what happens to you. Thanks for being willing to look at different ways to handle things. We're cool, OK? I like your ideas about chilling out on the pre-partying and the flavored vodka shots. I think that'll really help, and I know you'll still have a good time. Next party, you have any problems, just come hang out with me.

Things to Keep in Mind During the Conversation

- Stay on topic. Don't let the conversation drift away from what the person wants to do the next time they use alcohol as a result of what happened the last time.
- If the person starts to make excuses or blame someone else for what happened, remind them about their risk failure and emphasize that you're not concerned with who is to blame but with what they need to do to experience risk success.
- If the other person is resistant or defensive, stop the conversation, and reaffirm that the point of the conversation is not to blame them or make them feel badly, but to help. If they continue being resistant or defensive, try having the talk another time.
- Keep the conversation short and sweet—no longer than 15 minutes. Let the other person decide if they want to talk longer.
- Don't take on more than you can handle. If the conversation gives rise to very strong feelings or challenging issues, refer the person to your school's counseling services or student health services, using the numbers you wrote down before the conversation.
- Use the resources of your school! You are not expected to solve the other person's problems, but you can remind them who on campus and in the community may be able to help them.