

# Young people, drugs, alcohol and mental health



**Drug and alcohol use alters how the brain functions, and this is often the attraction for young people. People who use drugs and alcohol want to change how they are feeling. Some want to relax and wind down, while others want to be stimulated or escape from their reality for a while. It is hard to predict how drugs and alcohol will affect someone. It is important to help young people develop healthy opinions and attitudes towards drugs and alcohol.**

Some of the most common substances used by young people are alcohol and cannabis.

A survey of Australian secondary students aged between 12 and 17 years found that at some time in their lives.<sup>1</sup>

- 80 per cent had previously tried alcohol
- 14 per cent had used cannabis
- 19 per cent had used inhalants.

Of people aged 16-24, 12.7 per cent are estimated to have a substance use disorder, with a higher rate among young men than young women.<sup>2</sup>

## How drug and alcohol use affects mental health

Alcohol, cannabis, amphetamines, hallucinogens and inhalants all affect the brain in different ways. Some act as depressants, while others are stimulants and hallucinogens. Drug Facts offers information on individual drugs and their effects. For more information visit [www.druginfo.adf.org.au](http://www.druginfo.adf.org.au)

Some of the effects of drug and alcohol use include anxiety, agitation, feeling flat or unmotivated, moodiness and changes to a person's sense of reality. These changes in thoughts, feelings and emotions can also lead young people to do things that they would not normally, such as becoming very aggressive or taking unnecessary risks.

The impact of drugs and alcohol can mean many people also find it hard to maintain relationships with friends and family, or that their work or study performance deteriorates.

For those who have become addicted to their drug of choice, not having the drug can leave them in a constant state of distress.

Drug and alcohol use can contribute to the development of anxiety and depression, and for some their drug use can also trigger psychosis. For those who already have a mental health problem, drug and alcohol use can worsen their symptoms, while also interfering with the person's recovery.

## How you can tell if someone is struggling with drugs and alcohol

If you are wondering about whether drugs and alcohol are an issue for someone, there are a couple of things to consider:

- Are you aware of them using any drugs and alcohol? Do you know how much or how often?
- Have their energy levels changed?
- Are they experiencing more frequent mood changes?
- Are they having trouble concentrating or making decisions?
- Are they drinking alcohol every time they socialise with their friends? Are they returning home intoxicated each time?
- Are they regretful or embarrassed after drinking alcohol?
- Are they getting involved in more fights or socialising less?
- Is money becoming more of an issue than usual?

It's important not to jump to conclusions when you are worried someone is using drugs or drinking excessively. Take the time to talk about it with them and listen carefully as they respond to your concerns. With a bit of thought and conversation you can find a way to approach the situation together. This is an important first step when supporting a young person to develop healthy life habits.



## What you can do if drugs and alcohol are becoming a problem

When someone close to you uses drugs and alcohol you can:

- help them to build positive coping skills and improve their general wellbeing
- support them to change drug and alcohol habits that may have already developed.

## Supporting positive health and wellbeing

- Maintain clear and open communication, building trust and respect.
- Appreciate the young person's achievements.
- Have clear standards and rules for everyone in the family and encourage young people to take responsibility for their actions.
- Offer assistance and support if/when needed without judgment or anger.
- Understand that your behaviour can influence the behaviour of young people around you. Set an example by developing healthy habits, such as following the Australian alcohol guidelines or using music, yoga or meditation to relax.
- Be informed. Learn more about drugs and alcohol and how they can affect a young person. Use evidence-based sources to ensure you have accurate information.
- Talk openly about drugs and alcohol with young people and listen carefully to their views. Use this as an opportunity to discuss some strategies to cope if they ever feel pressured to use drugs or alcohol.

## Supporting change

Changing drug and alcohol habits is a process and can take time. It requires a person to be motivated for change and you can support them through this process.

- Talk about the benefits of change, what they want to change and how this can happen. How can they achieve their goals? If they don't think they can stop completely, could they consider reducing how much or how often they use drugs and/or alcohol?
- Monitor changes in their mood and how they interact with others. If you notice changes, talk to them about what's happening and any professional help they might need.
- Help them identify things they can do when they are stressed, anxious or feeling down so that they are less likely to rely on drugs and alcohol.
- Talk about how you can support them through this change: "How can we support each other?"
- Have realistic expectations for change. There are going to be some ups and downs; accept these and support the young person to get back on track.
- Seek advice from drug and alcohol services about how you can approach the situation.
- Have your own support network to help you maintain your own health and wellbeing.

## Helping young people to stay safe

Whether a young person has just started or is trying to stop using drugs and alcohol, it's important to

encourage them to use safely. You could encourage them to:

- learn about the impact of drugs and alcohol – sit down together and do some online research
- talk about setting limits around how much they are using, whether it is alcohol or other drugs.
- avoid situations where they know they will use drugs or alcohol
- stay with friends when using in case they need help
- eat prior to and while drinking alcohol
- have drug and/or alcohol free days
- use clean and hygienic tools to minimise the risk of infections and disease
- tell their doctor about their use, particularly if they are being prescribed any medication, in case of any harmful interactions
- talk with someone about their drug and alcohol use – online, over the phone or face to face
- look after their general wellbeing – maintain a healthy diet, get regular sleep and exercise.

## Getting support

Supporting someone who is using drugs and alcohol can be difficult and at times unpredictable. Drug and alcohol support services can provide information and counselling to help young people and their families through this process. There are also many other services that support young people through difficult times, including doctors, headspace, Kids Helpline and **beyondblue Support Service**. These can be accessed in person, online or over the phone.

Sometimes a young person will have to try a few different services before they find a counsellor that they feel comfortable with. Encourage the young person to persevere and try out other services and counsellors where necessary.

Many young people worry about what will happen if they seek help, particularly with regards to confidentiality. It's important to reassure young people that health services must abide by laws around confidentiality. For people over 18 years of age, what is said to health services remains confidential unless there are any risks to the person, or they pose a risk to someone else. If the young person is under 18, the health service will work with them to identify what support they need.

For many young people, the idea of talking to someone they don't know can be daunting. While services differ in their approach, generally young people will be asked to talk about themselves, their habits, friendships, family, challenges and goals; all at a pace that works for them. The counsellor will work to make the young person feel comfortable with the process and help them talk about difficult emotions, thoughts or experiences. The counsellor's role is to support the young person to reach their goals in a way that works for them.

You can help young people understand more about counselling by explaining some of this to them and answering their questions. If they want to know more about what to expect you can access information online or from your local counselling service.

Drug and alcohol use is a serious issue that confronts many young people and their families. Changing drug habits isn't easy, but it is important for maintaining good mental health. With time, commitment, support, and the right help, a young person can develop healthy attitudes and behaviours towards drugs and alcohol.

## References

- <sup>1</sup> White, V. and Smith, G. (2008). *Australian secondary school students' use of tobacco, alcohol, and over-the-counter and illicit substances in 2008*. Melbourne: Cancer Council Victoria.
- <sup>2</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics (2008). *National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing: Summary of Results, 2007* (4326.0). Canberra: Australian Bureau of Statistics.

## Where to find more information

### beyondblue

[www.beyondblue.org.au](http://www.beyondblue.org.au)

Learn more about anxiety and depression, or talk it through with our Support Service.

1300 22 4636

Email or  chat to us online at [www.beyondblue.org.au/getsupport](http://www.beyondblue.org.au/getsupport)

### mindhealthconnect

[www.mindhealthconnect.org.au](http://www.mindhealthconnect.org.au)

Access to trusted, relevant mental health care services, online programs and resources.

### Kids Help Line

[www.kidshelp.com.au](http://www.kidshelp.com.au)

1800 55 1800

### headspace

[www.headspace.org.au](http://www.headspace.org.au)

[www.eheadspace.org.au](http://www.eheadspace.org.au)

1800 650 890

### ReachOut

[www.reachout.com](http://www.reachout.com)

### Family Drug Support

[www.fds.org.au](http://www.fds.org.au)

### Counselling online

[www.counsellingonline.org.au](http://www.counsellingonline.org.au)

1800 888 236

### Cannabis helpline

[www.ncpic.org.au/ncpic/helpline/](http://www.ncpic.org.au/ncpic/helpline/)

1800 30 40 50

### Alcoholics Anonymous

[www.aa.org.au](http://www.aa.org.au)

### Narcotics Anonymous

[www.na.org.au](http://www.na.org.au)

### Hello Sunday Morning

[www.hellosundaymorning.org](http://www.hellosundaymorning.org)

### State-based alcohol and drug information services

[www.druginfo.adf.org.au/contact-numbers/help-and-support](http://www.druginfo.adf.org.au/contact-numbers/help-and-support)

ACT (02) 6207 9977

QLD 1800 177 833

NSW 1800 422 599  
or (02) 9361 8000

NT 1800 131 350

SA 1300 131 340  
or (08) 8363 8618

VIC 1800 888 236

TAS 1800 811 994

WA 1800 198 024  
or (08) 9442 5000

### Drug Facts

[www.druginfo.adf.org.au/drug-facts](http://www.druginfo.adf.org.au/drug-facts)

### Australian Drug Foundation

[www.adf.org.au](http://www.adf.org.au)

### The Other Talk

[www.theothertalk.org.au](http://www.theothertalk.org.au)

### National Drugs Campaign

[www.drugs.health.gov.au](http://www.drugs.health.gov.au)

### National Cannabis Prevention and Information Centre

[www.ncpic.org.au](http://www.ncpic.org.au)

### Youth Support and Advocacy Service

[www.ysas.org.au](http://www.ysas.org.au)



[facebook.com/beyondblue](http://facebook.com/beyondblue)



[twitter.com/beyondblue](http://twitter.com/beyondblue)

Donate online [www.beyondblue.org.au/donations](http://www.beyondblue.org.au/donations)