

Drugs, alcohol and mental health

Drugs and alcohol change the way your brain and body works. They change the balance of chemicals that help your brain to think, feel, create and make decisions. The drugs and alcohol you use can affect you both now and in the future.

Changing drug and alcohol habits can take time, but with support and perseverance you will notice positive changes in your mental and physical wellbeing.

DRUGS, ALCOHOL AND YOUR MIND

Drug and alcohol use affects the balance of chemicals in your brain, so it's difficult to predict how you will respond to them. Everyone is different. Every drug is different. And what happens each time you use can be different too.

Alcohol and drug use can leave you feeling anxious, agitated, panicked, flat, unmotivated and moody, while your sense of reality can also be affected.

It is important to remember that areas of your brain are generally still developing into your twenties and you are more likely to experience the negative effects of drugs and alcohol.

Heavy alcohol use and drug use interferes with your brain's development and can cause brain damage resulting in learning difficulties, memory problems, as well as anxiety and depression.

For some people using drugs, such as cannabis, may also trigger psychosis.

If you already have a mental health problem, drug and alcohol use can worsen their symptoms, while making recovery much harder.

For further information on cannabis use and psychosis visit druginfo.adf.org.au

It's important to understand the risks.

For more information visit ysas.org.au and theothertalk.org.au

These reactions may be short term but they can affect the way you think, make decisions and behave. There is a risk that while intoxicated you might act in ways that are out of character and that you later regret; you might act aggressively, take unnecessary risks or attempt to hurt yourself.

Drug and alcohol use is likely to affect your relationships with your friends and family, as well as causing potential problems for you at home, school or in the work environment.

TYPES OF DRUGS AND ALCOHOL

There are three main types of drugs – depressants, stimulants and hallucinogens. They all cause your mind and body to react in different ways.

Depressants slow your body down; your breathing and heart rate can slow down, you can experience nausea and vomiting, and your ability to think and react to what is happening around you can be affected. You might also notice changes in your mood, both in the short and the longer term, as a result of regular depressant use. Alcohol, heroin, cannabis, sedatives and inhalants are depressants. Cannabis can also cause you to experience extreme anxiety or panic.

Stimulants speed your body up. They increase your heart rate, body temperature and blood pressure. People using stimulants can feel an increase in confidence, motivation and energy, and a decrease in the need for sleep. While some may say that they enjoy this 'buzz', stimulants can cause you to feel agitated, anxious, aggressive and even paranoid. You can also experience a

range of physical side effects, such as severe stomach cramps, headaches and dizziness. Methamphetamines, cocaine and ecstasy are some of the commonly known stimulants.

Hallucinogens affect your sense of time and your emotional state, and can cause you to experience auditory or visual hallucinations (hearing or seeing things that are not there). Many people experience unpleasant or scary changes to their reality as a result of using hallucinogens. These negative effects can also be relieved if the person experiences 'flashbacks' sometime later. Hallucinogens include LSD, ketamine and magic mushrooms. Cannabis can also have hallucinogenic effects.

How people react to drugs and alcohol depends on the person's size, the type and amount of alcohol and drugs being taken, and how often they are being used. For more information about particular drugs and their effects have a look at Drug Facts druginfo.adf.org.au

WHAT ARE YOUR HABITS LIKE?

Sometimes it can be hard to see how drugs and alcohol are really affecting you until you begin to look more closely at your habits.

- How often are you using drugs or alcohol?
- Can you have a good time without thinking that you need drugs or alcohol?
- Why do you use? Do you use drugs and alcohol to get away from something in your life?

- Have you noticed a change in your energy levels? More tired? More energy?
- Are you experiencing changes in your mood? Finding it changing more quickly, or feeling more unhappy than usual?
- Are you having trouble concentrating or making decisions?
- Are your friends or family asking you to take it easy?
- Are you having trouble sleeping, eating or just doing your normal daily tasks?
- Are you experiencing blackouts regularly?

If you have noticed a change in how you feel and cope with your daily life, it's important to consider why. There could be a range of reasons, but if you are using drugs and alcohol, they could be affecting you more than you realise. You might want to consider changing your drug and alcohol habits.

MINIMISING THE RISKS

Whether you have just started and/or are trying to stop using drugs and alcohol, it's important to keep safe.

- Take it easy on the alcohol. Pace yourself and drink plenty of water.
- Set a limit on your alcohol and drug use – what you take and how much – and think about who can help you keep on track.
- Don't mix drugs as you have no way of predicting how they will react together.
- Don't use drugs alone. Ensure friends are nearby and ask for help if things don't feel right.
- Use clean and hygienic tools to minimise the risk of infections and disease.
- If you are prescribed medication, talk with your health professional about any harmful interactions.

BEGINNING TO CHANGE YOUR HABITS

It can take time to change drug and alcohol habits. It can help to:

- Read online information about changing drug habits so you know what to expect.
- Build in some alcohol and/ or drug free days in your week. hellosundaymorning.org can help you stick to your goals.
- Let your friends know you are trying to cut down and ask for their support.
- Leave a party early or decide not to go to parties where there is a risk you might use too much.
- Do things that take your focus away from drugs or alcohol – dance, music, games, art, sing or bike ride.
- Make it difficult to access drugs – hang out with friends who do not use drugs and alcohol.
- Try exercise, meditation or doing things you enjoy to tackle stress and anxiety rather than using drugs or alcohol.
- Look after your physical health by eating well, drinking water and exercising regularly.

- Ask a counsellor, doctor or health professional to support you as you try to change your habits.
- If you feel you need additional support, join a self-help group.
- Remind yourself that changing habits takes time and that it's normal to stumble along the way.
- Keep trying. There is no right way to do things; you need to find what works for you.

GETTING SUPPORT

After you have decided to change your drug and alcohol habits, having a strong support network around you is really important. Support from friends and family is essential; they will provide reassurance and encouragement when you need it most.

TALK ABOUT IT

You should also consider including a drug and alcohol worker or counsellor in your plan for change. They can help you:

- set realistic goals for yourself
- explore how you can cope when you feel like using drugs or alcohol
- strengthen your health and wellbeing
- keep safe while you are using drugs and alcohol.

Many health services are available online, over the phone or in person, so you can link into support in a way that you feel comfortable. If you're not sure what to expect, this can be one of your first questions when you contact the health service – "What do you do and how does it work? How is this going to help me?"

The time you spend with a counsellor, whether it is online, over the phone or in person, is just another conversation. If the counsellor asks questions that you feel uncomfortable answering, let them know, and they can perhaps come back to it at another time. Don't worry about not knowing what to say – just start talking and see what happens. You might find that it's easier than you thought. And if it doesn't feel like much is changing after you have seen your counsellor for a while, don't give up. Look around and find someone else to try. It can sometimes take a few tries before you find the person that best suits you, so keep at it.

WHAT ABOUT CONFIDENTIALITY?

Some people worry about confidentiality, but 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. Talk to your counsellor about confidentiality if you are worried about it.

WATCHING OUT FOR FRIENDS

Supporting someone who is using drugs and alcohol can be really hard. Often you see things that the other person cannot; the changes in their thinking, their mood and the way they act with you and other friends or workmates. You might want to tell them to stop using, and you might

have tried this, but you can't force them to change – they need to make that choice for themselves.

- Be a supportive and respectful friend. This does not mean that you have to support their drug use; it means that you are supporting them emotionally. You can listen, talk about what is going on and let them know that they are not alone.
- Help them stay connected with friends that they share positive relationships with.
- Encourage them to continue doing things that help to improve their mood naturally – drug free. Activities might include sport, music, drama, volunteering or hiking.
- Ask them what you can do to help them. Often providing practical support, such as helping with homework, can take the pressure off.
- Encourage them to talk with you or someone they trust about what is worrying them. These worries might be what triggers their drug and alcohol use.
- Help them find information and advice about drug and alcohol use online, over the phone or in person (see Where to find support). If they are not interested you might suggest it again sometime, but be careful not to hassle them about it.
- Encourage them to use safely to minimise the risks of them hurting themselves. If you are not sure what precautions they should take you can learn more together online.
- Remember that change takes time. Be patient and acknowledge their achievements, no matter how small, even if you do not understand what they are doing and why.

- Talk to someone, a trusted adult or a drug and alcohol service (anonymously if you like), and ask for advice about helping your friend or family member.
- If you are worried about your friend hurting themselves let someone know; their parents, partner, or local mental health service. You could also encourage them to contact the *beyondblue* Support Service for support.

Supporting someone who is using drugs and alcohol can be exhausting. It is important to take care of your own health and wellbeing during this time. Look after your physical health, take time out to do things you enjoy, and have your own supportive friends to call on when you need it. You might also find that at times you need a break, and that's OK too. Just make sure your friend or family member knows how much time you need so they do not feel rejected or alone.

While there are many things about drug and alcohol use that are unpredictable, one thing we know for sure is that they affect mental health. Reducing or cutting out drug and alcohol use improves health and wellbeing, and your support as your friend or family member makes these changes will be crucial in helping them through the process. It is not always easy but it is worth it.

Where to find support

For help with how you're feeling

beyondblue

www.youthbeyondblue.com

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

 1300 22 4636

 Email or  chat to us online at www.beyondblue.org.au/getsupport

Kids Help Line

www.kidshelp.com.au

1800 55 1800

headspace

www.headspace.org.au

www.eheadspace.org.au

1800 650 890

ReachOut

Reachout.com

Alcoholics Anonymous

www.aa.org.au

Narcotics Anonymous

www.na.org.au

Hello Sunday Morning

www.hellosundaymorning.org

State-based alcohol and drug information services

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

For more info on alcohol and drugs

Australian Drug Foundation

www.adf.org.au

The Other Talk

theothertalk.org.au

National Drugs Campaign

www.drugs.health.gov.au

National Cannabis Prevention and Information Centre

ncpic.org.au

Youth Support and Advocacy Service

www.ysas.org.au



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