

EU funds
for Malta
2014-2020

Understanding

SUBSTANCE USE, MISUSE, ABUSE

in young people

An introductory information booklet
about Substance Use, Misuse, Abuse
in young people for parents and guardians

ankrayouth.org



What is Substance Use, Misuse, Abuse?

A substance use disorder involves using too much alcohol, tobacco or other drugs. It can also be called substance abuse, substance dependence or addiction.

Drugs are substances that affect how the body functions. Cannabis is the most commonly used drug among the Maltese adult population aged 18–65 years; it is illegal for those under 18 years (*for further details please refer to the legislation*). According to a 2013 general population study, around 4.3% of those aged 18–65 years reported having used cannabis during their lifetime. The level of lifetime use of illicit drugs other than cannabis was 1.4% (MDMA/ecstasy, amphetamines, cocaine, heroin, mephedrone, any of the new psychoactive substances (NPS) or LSD); MDMA was the most popular among this group of substances. Drug use was more prevalent in younger adults, with the prevalence of lifetime use of cannabis at 5.1% among 18- to 24-year-olds. (*National Report on the Drug Situation in Malta, 2019*).

Adolescent alcohol use in Malta

The European School Survey Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs (ESPAD) is a report which collects and analyzes data on substance use and addiction amongst 15 to 16-year old school students. The data for the ESPAD study is collected every four years and the 2019 survey is the seventh edition of the report. 3,043 Maltese and Gozitan students between the ages of 15 to 16 years from all types of schools participated in the 2019

ESPAD survey. The survey showed the following results about adolescent alcohol use behaviors in Malta:

- 34% of students started alcohol use at 13 years of age or younger;
- 6% have been alcohol intoxicated at age 13 or younger;
- 73% reported consuming alcohol within the past 12 months;
- 48% reported consuming alcohol within the last 30 days, and;
- 85% of students perceived alcohol as being "fairly" or "very easy" to obtain. Beer was reported easiest to obtain at 75%, followed by 72% for wine, 67% for premixed drinks, 60% for spirits, and 59% for ciders.

Alcohol consumption among Maltese school students is higher than in other European countries as per ESPAD results.

When does drug or alcohol use become a problem?

Drug and alcohol misuse isn't necessarily related to how often — or in what quantity — a person uses drugs or consumes alcohol, but the impact this has on their life. Drug or alcohol use can become a problem when it starts to affect a person's judgement, relationships or general health and wellbeing. It can cause them to neglect other responsibilities such as school, work or family. Many people use substances such as

drugs or alcohol to relax, have fun, experiment, or cope with stressors. However, for some people the use of substances or engaging in certain behaviours can become problematic and may lead to dependence. Harmful drug use is often associated with illicit drugs such as speed or heroin but prescription or over-the-counter medicines can also be used in a harmful way, as can alcohol.

While some people may be able to consume substances without resulting in significant harms, some people may experience ongoing substance related problems. Alcohol and drugs are addictive substances that can cause symptoms of depression and/or anxiety or make an existing problem worse, while making recovery much harder. Some people with depression and/or anxiety can also develop problems with drugs and alcohol, which may also need treatment.



It isn't about how often — or in what quantity — a person uses drugs or consumes alcohol, but the **impact this has on their life**

What causes Substance Use, Misuse, Abuse?

People use substances for different reasons, and in varying degrees. For some people there may not be any harms related to their substance use, however, for some there may be negative impacts on their lives.

The cause of substance use disorders is still unknown, though genetics are thought to account for 40% to 60% of a person's risk. Substance use often starts as a way to feel good or out of curiosity in childhood or early adolescence. Repeated use of the substance and increased tolerance pave the way to substance use disorder and addiction. Some youths who develop a substance use disorder have a co-occurring mental illness, such as depression, anxiety, or bi-polar disorder, and begin using drugs or alcohol to cope with their symptoms.

Other risk factors that may lead to a substance use disorder include:

- Family history of addiction
- Sleep problems
- Chronic pain
- Financial difficulties
- Divorce or the loss of a loved one
- Long-term tobacco habit
- Tense home environment
- Lack of parental attachment in childhood
- Relationship issues

Of course, none of these risk factors guarantees that a person will develop a substance abuse disorder, but a combination of factors plus repeated substance use significantly increase the likelihood of addiction.

How does substance abuse affect mental health?

Alcohol increases the risk of depression and anxiety and other mental illnesses in some people. Likewise, people with mental health issues are more likely to abuse alcohol than others. Alcohol can make medicine like antidepressants less effective. In the short term, alcohol is a major cause of violence and suicidal behaviour.

Having a mental illness can make someone more likely to abuse drugs to lessen their symptoms and make them feel better in the short term. In other people, drug problems may trigger the first symptoms of mental illness. People with a mental illness experience drug problems at a far higher rate than the general community.



Recognising Substance Use, Misuse, Abuse

It can be difficult to tell if your child is consuming harmful levels of drugs or alcohol, especially if they're trying to hide their drug or alcohol use.

Some drugs can result in noticeable physical symptoms, including:

- pupils that are larger or smaller than normal
- frequent nosebleeds
- shakes or tremors
- sudden weight loss or gain
- difficulty sleeping
- runny nose or sniffing.

Your child may be misusing drugs or alcohol if their use leads to:

- difficulty keeping up at school or work
- relationship or family problems
- legal or financial difficulties
- injuries — for example, due to accidents or violence after using drugs or alcohol.

Many young people experiment with alcohol or other drugs without becoming dependent on these substances, or developing an addiction. In other words, they are able to stop or cut down on their use without help. But some people cannot do this alone. Using drugs can affect the lives of those caught up in it in ways they might not expect. It can affect health, relationships, jobs and education. Recognising whether your child has a problem with drugs or alcohol is an important first step in seeking help and treatment.

Ask yourself these questions

The following questions are designed to help you recognise substance misuse or abuse:

- Is your child starting to experience problems like missing school or work or not doing things they were meant to?
- Have you noticed any injuries on your child that they can't remember doing?
- Are they having trouble sleeping, eating or just doing their normal daily tasks?
- Have you noticed a change in their energy levels? More tired? More energy?
- Do you know of them experiencing blackouts regularly?
- Do you observe them experiencing mood swings? Are you finding their mood changes more quickly, or seeing them more worried or unhappy than usual?
- Are they having trouble concentrating or making decisions?
- Do you find yourself asking them to take it easy with their drinking?

How can I help my child?

Supporting your child who is using drugs and alcohol can be really hard. Often you see things that they cannot; the changes in their thinking, their mood and the way they act with you and other friends, classmates or colleagues. 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 supportive and respectful

This does not mean that you have to support their drug or alcohol use; clearly state what you expect or any behaviours that you won't tolerate (for example drug use in your home) but support them emotionally. You can listen, talk about what is going on and let them know that you are there for them.

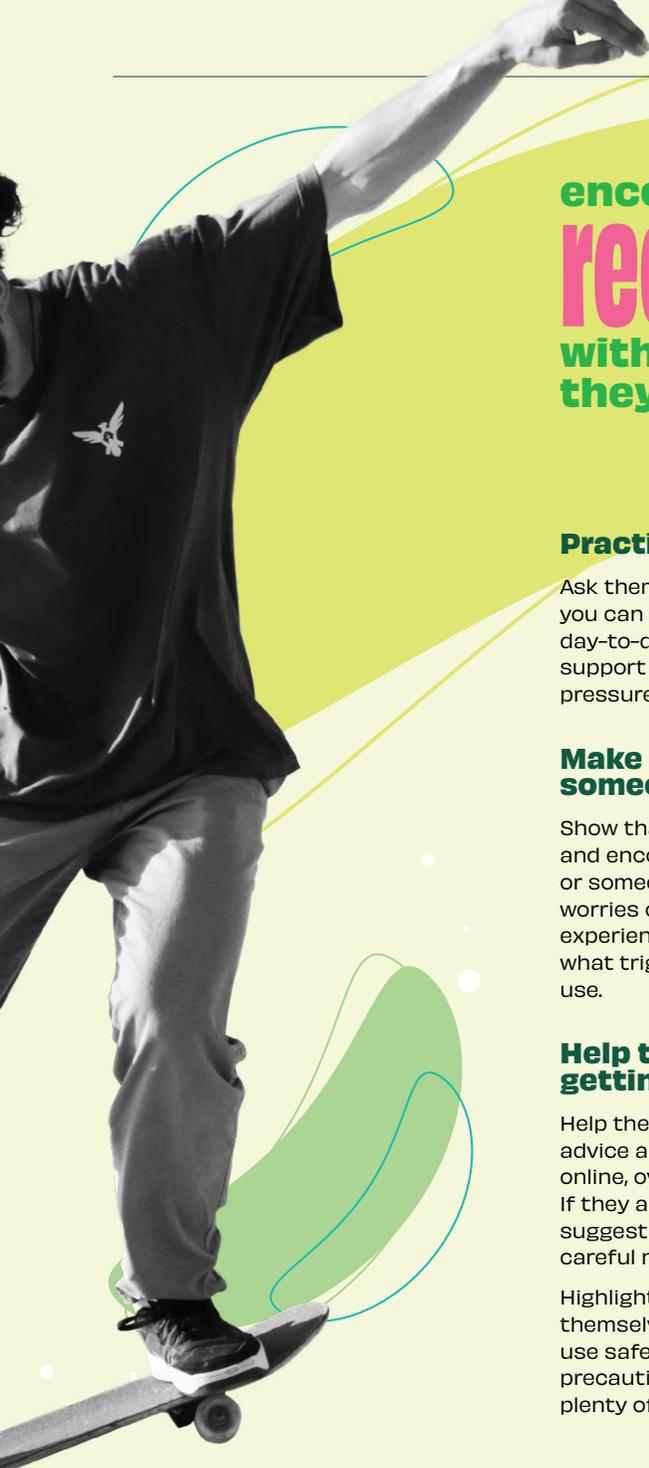
Positive relationships

Help them stay connected with true friends that they share positive relationships with.

Improving their mood

Encourage them to continue doing things that help to improve their mood naturally – drug and alcohol free. Exercise has so many positive effects on the brain – also other activities might include reconnecting with a hobby that they used to enjoy, a sport, or music, learning something new, volunteering or spending time in nature.





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Practical support

Ask them whether there is anything you can assist them with in their day-to-day. Often providing practical support can take some of the pressure off.

Make sure they have someone to talk to

Show that you are available to listen and encourage them to talk with you or someone they trust about any worries or anxieties that they are experiencing. These worries might be what triggers their drug and alcohol use.

Help them in getting informed

Help them find information and advice about drug and alcohol use online, over the phone or in person. If they are not interested you might suggest it again sometime, but be careful not to hassle them about it.

Highlight the risks of them hurting themselves and encourage them to use safely. If you are not sure what precautions they should take, there is plenty of information available online.



Every little victory counts

Remember that change will not happen overnight. Be patient and acknowledge their achievements, no matter how small, even if you find their actions difficult to comprehend.

Common reactions to avoid

When speaking to someone about their drug use, listen respectfully to their views, and respond calmly. The tone and the type of language you use is important.

Try to avoid the following, since this may upset the person and make them less likely to seek support:

- being judgmental
- lecturing the person
- making them feel guilty
- using bribes or threats
- using negative labels like 'addict'

Encourage them to seek help – have the conversation

Are you worried about a young person and not sure what to say? Do you worry that you might make things worse? You want to help them, but not sure how? It all starts with a conversation.

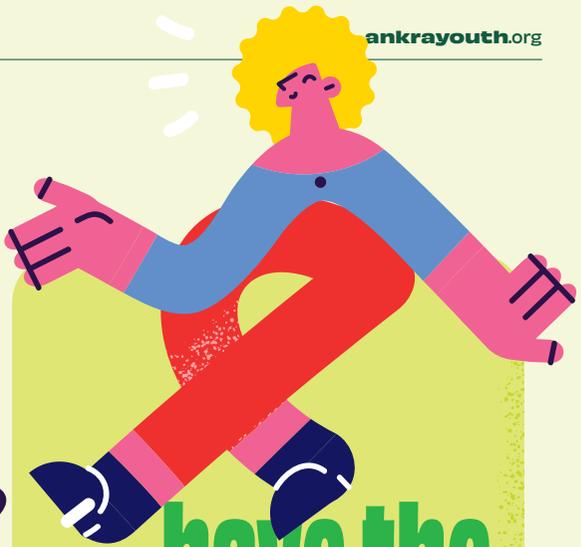
Even if you aren't sure quite what to say, the important thing is that

you say something. Let them know that you are concerned and why. By starting a conversation and showing your concern and willingness to support them, you're giving them an opportunity to share what they are going through. This can make all the difference in ensuring they get any support they might need.

Look after yourself

Supporting someone who is using drugs and alcohol can be exhausting. It's important to take care of your own health and wellbeing during this time.

- Look after your physical health. Take time to eat nourishing meals, get regular exercise if possible to do so, and watch your sleep patterns.
- Take time out to do things you enjoy.
- Have your own supportive friends to call on when you need it.
- Take a break – this might feel impossible to do but it is necessary sometimes. Just make sure your family member knows how much time you need so they do not feel rejected or alone.
- Create a boundary when you need it.



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What sort of treatments are available?

Your child may need professional support to help reduce their drug or alcohol use.

A General Practitioner (GP) is a good place to start. They can give your child information and refer them to other services for treatment, such as counselling or drug rehabilitation.

Drug treatment organisations

The following are the main drug treatment providers in Malta; some fully funded by the government, and others are NGOs partially funded by government, namely:

Aġenzija Sedqa

Caritas Malta

OASI Foundation (Gozo)

Some of the available services include:

Tal-Ibwar Adolescent Therapeutic Centre, Siggiewi (Caritas Malta);

San Blas Therapeutic Community (Caritas Malta);

Caritas Malta Community Services: Addiction Treatment Centre, Hamrun

These providers deliver different types of treatment, which can be classified into five main categories:

1: Specialised outpatient services

2: Low-threshold services

3: In-patient treatment programmes

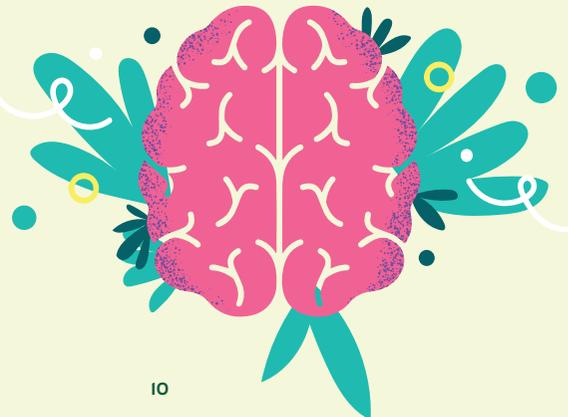
4: Detoxification treatment

5: Opioid substitution treatment (OST) now better described as Opiate agonist treatment (OAT).

NGO-based outpatient services offer long- or short-term support through social work, counselling, group therapy, and psychological interventions, while low-threshold programmes offer daycare services. Five inpatient units are available in Malta, of which three are therapeutic communities. The residential programmes provide a holistic, multidisciplinary approach to therapy in a communal living environment, and attempt to guide clients towards abstinence. One programme offers inpatient detoxification.

Other forms of help

Crisis support. The main way to get support during a mental health crisis is to call a 24-hour crisis line such as Richmond Helpline. If it is a medical emergency, call 112 or go the emergency department of Mater Dei Hospital.





Private therapist. Some people will seek out a therapist to talk about emotional difficulties they are struggling with that could be contributing to their addiction problems. Or they could seek out a therapist that specializes in certain types of addiction. You usually have to pay for a private therapist.

Self-help and peer support groups. Self-help groups are groups made up of people with similar problems (peers) who can support and listen to each other, and really understand what the person is going through. (AA Malta, Caritas Malta)

Private Residential treatment. This is more intensive treatment. Living in a residential treatment facility is usually the last resort when outpatient or day treatment has not worked.

Residential treatment is different than in-patient treatment, in that residential tends to be longer term. These programs last anywhere from about three weeks to several months.

Approaches to therapy

Depending on the intensity and focus of treatment, services may include:

- Individual or one-on-one therapy with an addiction counsellor;
- Group work;
- Family therapy.

Common approaches include:

Cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT), which focuses on changing how someone thinks and behave around a problem;

Motivational interviewing, which looks at the person's motivation to get treatment by exploring their ambivalence or mixed feelings about getting help

Dialectical behaviour therapy (DBT), which combines CBT with mindfulness or other group work to help people manage intense or overwhelming emotions.

Be part of reducing the stigma towards mental health.

A key element in reducing stigma related to mental health is for everyone within the community to have a good understanding of it – that is, improving our mental health literacy.

There are three key elements to mental health literacy:

- **knowledge of signs and symptoms of poor mental health**
- **knowledge of prevention and management techniques**
- **knowledge of how to support others**

It is important that we all play our part in challenging any misconceptions around anxiety with the intention to bring perceptions in line with reality.

Useful support:

www.oli.chat

Richmond's free, 24/7 webchat offering emotional support and practical guidance.

kellimni.com

A free, 24/7 support service managed by SOS Malta.

Aġenzija Żgħażaġh

Provides youths with a safe space to express views, needs and concerns.

Youth in Focus Service

Provides social work intervention to adolescents and young persons.

ANKRA is a project set up by Richmond for young people affected by mental health problems in Malta.

We are here to provide help, information and support.

Helpline: **1770**

Helpchat: **www.oli.chat**

info@ankrayouth.org

ankrayouth.org



**SUPPORTING
MENTAL WELLBEING
IN YOUTHS**



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