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SUBSTANCE USE, MISUSE, ABUSE

IN YOUNG PEOPLE

What you need to know

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Substance Use, Misuse and Abuse in young people

When people talk about substance use, they are usually referring to the consumption of substances like alcohol, drugs or other chemicals that can change the way we think and feel. Because they can alter thoughts and perceptions, these substances are described as “psychoactive”.

If you're going through a tough time, it can be tempting to use drugs and alcohol as a coping strategy. However, these 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.

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

Types of drugs

There are three main types of drugs – **depressants**, **stimulants** and **hallucinogens**. They all cause your mind and body to react in different ways. Each substance has its own effects on the body and mind and its own risks for harm. Because of the potential for harm, the use of some legal substances, like alcohol and tobacco products, is restricted to adult use only. Illegal street drugs will always have additional risks because their contents cannot be fully known. 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.

How people react to drugs and alcohol depends on the person's size, the type and amount of drugs and alcohol being taken, and how often they are being used.

Risk factors

Males are more likely than females to experience problems with substance use. Other factors associated with an increased risk for substance use issues may include:

- a family history of problems with substance use
- existing emotional or mental health issues, such as depression and anxiety
- low self-esteem
- feelings of not belonging
- past experience of trauma or abuse.

What are your habits like?

It is important to be aware of what drugs you are taking and how much you are drinking, if you are experimenting with these substances. Try keeping a diary for a week to keep track, and note down any specific reasons or triggers that make you feel like using. You could also ask yourself the following questions:

- Why do you use drugs and alcohol?
- Are you trying to escape something in your life?
- How often are you using drugs or alcohol?

- Are you using drugs or alcohol more regularly? Are you finding it hard to control how much you use?
- Are you starting to experience problems like missing work or not doing things you were meant to?
- Are you having trouble sleeping, eating or just doing your normal daily tasks?
- Have you noticed a change in your energy levels? More tired? More energy?
- Are you experiencing blackouts regularly?
- Are you experiencing changes in your mood? Finding it changing more quickly, or feeling more worried or unhappy than usual?
- Are you having trouble concentrating or making decisions?
- Are your friends or family asking you to take it easy?

Answering yes to several of these questions may mean that you are developing a problem with drugs or alcohol.

Taking Action

It can take time to change drug and alcohol habits. Some practical strategies include:

- Try not to take drugs or drink when you are feeling down or anxious.
- Avoid keeping drugs or alcohol in the house.
- Spend time with friends and family members who do not use drugs and alcohol.
- Take yourself out of situations where you know you will take drugs or drink excessively.
- Don't drink alone, and limit drinking to meal times.
- Choose drinks with a low alcohol content, or alternate alcoholic drinks with non-alcoholic drinks.
- Drink slowly – limit yourself to one drink per hour.

- Let your friends and family know you are trying to cut down and ask for their support.
- 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.

Go easy on yourself. Remind yourself that changing habits takes time and that it's normal to stumble along the way. Setting your own personal goals on how you plan to cut back gives you something tangible to aim for.

For example:

- how many drug or alcohol free days you will have each week (aim for at least two alcohol free days each week and as many drug-free days as possible)
- how many standard drinks you will limit yourself to on any one drinking day
- your maximum number of standard drinks per week.

If you need assistance, your doctor can provide more structured advice about how to change your habits, or refer you to psychologists or other counsellors for assistance.

Stopping completely

It can be hard to stop taking drugs or drinking completely. However, it is best to stop completely rather than just cutting back when:

- you've become dependent on drugs or alcohol
- your anxiety or depression is severe
- you have suicidal thoughts
- you've experienced physical health, personal, financial or legal problems as a result of your drinking or drug use.

If you are taking antidepressants it is important to understand how your medication might interact with drugs or alcohol.

or that focus on motivation are often used with success. Sometimes medications are helpful. Family therapy may also be involved.

Treatment

Different types of services are available to help young people with issues of substance use, depending upon what the problems are. For many, meeting with a counsellor for a number of sessions is sufficient while carrying on with a regular school routine. Others may benefit from a "day program" for a set length of time. If a more intensive approach is needed, there are residential programs where participants stay for the duration of the program – usually from a few weeks to a few months.

Treatment approaches that involve Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT)

Getting Support

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

You may need professional support to help you reduce your drug or alcohol use. A General Practitioner (GP) is a good place to start. They can give you information and refer you to other services for treatment, such as counselling or drug rehabilitation.



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

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.

Caritas Tal-Ibwar

Adolescents Therapeutic Centre

Offers therapeutic programmes for adolescents whose substance use is negatively affecting their lives.

