

What is Substance Misuse and Addiction?

Substance misuse is the harmful use of substances (like drugs and alcohol) for non-medical purposes. The term “substance misuse” often refers to illegal drugs. However, legal substances can also be misused, such as alcohol, prescription medications, caffeine, nicotine and volatile substances (e.g. petrol, glue, paint).

Addiction is a physical and/or psychological need for a substance, due to regular, continued use. Some substances are highly addictive, others are less addictive. However, the symptoms of addiction are similar no matter which substance is used.

Typical signs of substance misuse or addiction include:

- Neglecting responsibilities and activities you used to enjoy (e.g. work, family, hobbies, sports, socialising)
- Participating in dangerous or risky behaviours (e.g. drink driving, unprotected sex, using dirty needles)
- Criminal problems (e.g. disorderly behaviour, drink driving, stealing)
- Relationship problems (e.g. arguments with partner/family/friends, losing friends)
- Physical tolerance (e.g. needing more substance to experience the same effects, symptoms of withdrawal when not using)
- Losing control of your substance use (e.g. unable to stop using, even if you want to)
- Substance use takes over your life (e.g. spending a lot of time using, finding/getting drugs and recovering from the effects).

Why do people misuse substances?

People use drugs and alcohol for many reasons. We might use substances to relax, have fun, cope with or escape a problem or dull emotional/physical pain. However, using substances to cope with problems or numb your pain doesn't make the problems go away and can make them worse. Also, you might come to depend on drugs or alcohol as a way of coping, rather than seeking help and finding more positive strategies and solutions.

How does substance misuse and addiction affect wellbeing?

Substance misuse and addiction can have short and long-term effects on you:

- Physical health – e.g. nausea, sleep problems, weight gain/loss, infections, accidents, chronic disease
- Mental health – e.g. depression, anxiety, paranoia, psychosis
- Personal relationships – e.g. arguments, relationship breakdowns
- Work and financial situation – e.g. job loss, debt, unemployment, criminal problems

What helps?

Recognise when your substance use becomes a problem – realising and accepting that you are misusing or addicted to a substance is the first step in finding solutions.

Get support – getting through substance misuse and addiction on your own is very difficult. Talking to family members, friends, your doctor, other health professionals or a telephone helpline (such as Lifeline) about your substance use can help you to feel supported, find appropriate treatment options and assist in your recovery.

Investigate treatment options – there are many ways to manage substance misuse and addiction, including some free and low cost options. Types of support include counselling, medication, rehabilitation centres, self-help programs, support networks and others. Talk to a helpline or doctor about available services. Everyone responds differently, so you may need to try a number of options to find what works for you.

Find alternative coping strategies – often people use substances to cope with or escape other personal problems. Finding positive ways of managing stress and problems will help you to manage your substance use and prevent relapses.

Dealing with setbacks – recovery from substance addiction is a long road and sometimes you may experience setbacks. Rather than giving up or feeling like a failure following a relapse, try to get back on the wagon as quickly as possible. It also helps to figure out what triggered the relapse and how you can change your behaviour in the future.



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Find out more

Call Lifeline – **13 11 14** if you need to speak to someone about substance misuse or addiction for you or someone you know.

Alternatively, call DirectLine on 1800 888 236 or Drug ARM on 1300 656 800.

Visit www.lifeline.org.au to find a range of self-help resources and information.

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