

FAQ: Alcohol, Other Drugs and Mental Health Needs in Young People

WHY DO YOUNG PEOPLE USE ALCOHOL AND OTHER DRUGS?

Young people's lives are often defined by quick changes, experimentation and risk taking. These stages of development are important and normal. Part of this development may include alcohol or other drugs.

Just like adults, young people use alcohol and other drugs (including the non-medical use of medication) for many reasons across different stages of life.

Some of the most common reasons are:

- curiosity
- enjoyment
- confidence
- mood enhancement
- to experiment
- to relax
- to rebel
- to fit in with a group
- to cope with physical or mental pain.

MOST YOUNG PEOPLE WHO USE ALCOHOL AND OTHER DRUGS DON'T EXPERIENCE MAJOR HARM

Many young people experiment with drug use and don't experience significant harm. Not all drug use leads to dependence (addiction). However, when young people experience drug dependence, it's rarely because of one single factor.

There could be a range of factors for the young person such as:

- genetics
- family
- friends
- school
- community
- life experiences.

Did you know that young people are increasingly choosing not to drink alcohol? The average age of young people trying alcohol for the first time has also risen.

And, young people have been reporting less drug use since 2001.

HOW CAN WE ENCOURAGE SAFER ALCOHOL AND OTHER DRUG USE?

Educating young people about the risks and harms associated with alcohol and other drug (AOD) use can help them make safer choices and reduce harm.

'Just say no' and zero-tolerance approaches to school-based AOD education are not effective.

Best practice involves harm minimisation that encourages safer behaviour and help-seeking.

So, what works?

- delaying the age when alcohol and other drug use starts
- avoiding regular use
- early intervention.

WHAT'S THE CONNECTION BETWEEN MENTAL HEALTH, ALCOHOL AND OTHER DRUG USE?

Young people experiencing mental ill health may be more likely to use drugs to cope with their symptoms in the short-term.

We don't know which comes first – mental ill health or AOD use. But we do know that they influence each other.

Common mental health symptoms for young people are:

- hopelessness
- anxiety
- low mood
- irritability
- lack of quality sleep
- negative, racing, and intrusive thoughts.

Other young people may find that alcohol and drug use impacts their mental health.

Different drugs can also alleviate different mental health symptoms. The same young person might use cannabis to relax but use ecstasy to enhance their mood with friends.

A young person may first start using substances to enhance positive feelings.

The shift to using substances frequently or using multiple substances at one time, to cope with negative feelings and withdrawal symptoms, should not be ignored.

WHAT ARE CO-OCCURRING MENTAL HEALTH AND ALCOHOL AND OTHER DRUG CONDITIONS?

Co-occurring mental health and AOD conditions in young people means that both conditions are medically diagnosable and are occurring at the same time.

Co-occurring mental health and AOD conditions will affect each young person differently.

When either condition is present and untreated, this can worsen the symptoms of each condition.

Young people may seek treatment for one issue or receive treatment for both issues from different services. This can be difficult to sustain.

But, integrated AOD and mental health support is increasingly available. Integrated care is when a service will work with both the AOD and mental health needs of the young person.

WHAT ARE THE BARRIERS FOR SEEKING HELP?

Young people with mental health and alcohol and other drug conditions may be hesitant to seek help due to:

- stigma
- belief that help was unavailable, inaccessible, or ineffective
- thinking their problem wasn't serious enough
- wanting to resolve the issue on their own
- distrust towards health professionals
- transportation.

Understand more about these barriers [here](#).

Many young people belong to more than one historically excluded community. These can include:

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people
- lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and/or intersex (LGBTIQ+) young people
- discriminated against multicultural young people
- young people who have had contact with the criminal justice system.

Young people with these intersecting identities often experience increased discrimination and stigma. Disconnection from culture and community can be a sign that a young person needs further support.

HOW DO I HAVE A CONVERSATION WITH A YOUNG PERSON ABOUT THEIR SUBSTANCE USE?

Conversations about alcohol and other drugs can start at an early age and be ongoing.

Using hopeful, curious, and non-judgmental language can help reduce barriers and stigma.

We have some great resources on how to have conversations with young people about substance use – check them out [here](#).

WHERE CAN I GET HELP FOR A YOUNG PERSON EXPERIENCING CO-OCCURRING DRUG USE AND MENTAL HEALTH CONDITIONS?

It's important to understand that the young person:

- may not want to reduce or stop their drug use
- may not feel ready for treatment
- may not be able to access medication or therapies.

Talking compassionately with them will help you understand what kind of support they need.

The following services can offer resources, secondary consultation, and clinical support for both the young person and you.

Youth Drugs and Alcohol Advice (YoDAA)
1800 458 685

headspace
1800 650 890

Kids Helpline
1800 55 1800

Q - Life
1800 184 527

National Alcohol and Other Drug Hotline
1800 250 015

Read the full report on the [Alcohol and Drug Foundation website](#).