LEARN TO
MANAGE ALCOHOL
AND OTHER DRUG USE

COUNSELLING AND
PSYCHOLOGICAL
SERVICES (CAPS)

THE UNIVERSITY OF
SYDNEY
If you are feeling that your drinking or drug use is starting to affect your health, study, or relationships, or that you increasingly need a substance in order to function, cope, or have a good time, then the following information may be useful.

This Learn To will help you to:

– Raise your awareness of some of the effects of alcohol and drugs
– Check out whether your drinking or drug use has become problematic
– Learn practical strategies to help you make meaningful changes in your use of alcohol or other drugs
Alcohol and drugs can make you feel happy or high and they can also do you harm. There is a lot of information available to help you make an informed choice about your drug and alcohol use. Check out the information below and/or the following website: Just Ask Us.

OTHER DRUGS
The effects of drugs can vary depending upon the kind of drug taken, how much is taken, how often it is used, how quickly it gets to the brain, and what other substances are taken at the same time. For information about specific drugs and their effects see Just Ask Us. For comprehensive information about cannabis, its effects and treatment options see NCPIC.

If you are curious, you can also take a look at the Mouse Party to see how various drugs work at a synaptic level to make users feel “high”.
Alcohol can slow you down and impair your co-ordination, judgement and response time. It won't necessarily make you feel depressed but will exaggerate the mood you were in before drinking. If you have a mental health issue like depression, alcohol can make these feeling stronger.

Binge-drinking is very common among university students. Australian medical experts (National Health and Medical Research Centre) recommend that both males and females over the age of 18 drink no more than four standard drinks on a single occasion in order to reduce the risk of an immediate alcohol-related injury. You should also take care not to drink too quickly (no more than 2 for males and 1 for females, in the first hour).

Often people think that if they don't drink daily there is no problems with binge drinking once a week or so. However, binge drinking – even rarely, increases the risk of alcohol poisoning. Getting drunk on a binge can also mean that you can end up getting into fights, having unsafe sex, being vulnerable to sexual assault and rape or ending up in car or other accidents. (source: Headspace). Check out the videos above on the physical and other impacts of binge drinking.

The NHMRC also recommends that you should take extra care about drinking if you are taking medication or might be pregnant, or trying to do something that requires extra concentration (like driving or operating machinery). To find out more about standard drinks and the recommended guidelines for low-risk drinking see the NHMRC website.

Too much alcohol over the long term can also serious health problems. These can include liver and heart damage, elevated risks of cancer, stomach ulcers and brain damage. The brain does not finish developing for males until around 24, and for females around 22 years of age. The plasticity of the brain renders it particularly vulnerable to the damaging effects of alcohol. During adolescence, alcohol can seriously damage long and short term growth processes (see the ARBIAS website). You can also run the risk of becoming dependent on alcohol – and indeed if you find that you can drink more and more without getting drunk – that “tolerance” may in fact be a sign that you are already developing a problem.

The signs of that your alcohol or other drug use might be causing problems are:
- Not concentrating, missing deadlines or not meeting other responsibilities at university or your paid work
- Experiencing relationship difficulties with your partner, friends or family
- Often feeling hung-over or scattered
- Often feeling on edge
- Thinking about drinking or using/smoking more often than not
- Needing to drink or use more to feel the effects of the drug
- Not being able to stop drinking or using when you want to
- Experiencing risky, dangerous or distressing situations because of drinking or using drugs.

You can check out your drinking on the AUDIT questionnaire. You can also take the following online test (SDS) to check out if you have a problem with Cannabis.
THINKING ABOUT CHANGE

To help you weigh up whether you are ready to make a change try this decision sheet. It will help you to list the pros and cons of change, as well as the costs and benefits of continuing your alcohol or drug use.

You can also consider the following:

– Think about the things that are important to you, such as your family, your partner, your studies, or your health. How does your use affect those things?
– Talk it over with someone you trust. Ask the person how he or she feels about your alcohol or drug use.
– Ask yourself if there’s anything preventing you from changing. What are some things that could help you make the change?
– Think about your past attempts at change, if any. What worked? What didn’t?

You might also:

– Monitor your alcohol or drug use, including when and where, how much you use and/or how much money it costs you (see diary below). This will give you a better sense of the role it is playing in your life. Notice particularly the situations where you find difficult to manage your drinking or drug use. These are your “high risk” situations.

PLANNING AND GETTING STARTED

– Set a specific goal for change such as either quitting or cutting down on your substance use. You could also choose to stop using one drug but not another or to reduce the harm of your substance use (e.g. no binge drinking)
– Set a date for making the change
– Remind yourself of the reasons you want to change.
– Tell your friends and family that you’re changing your behaviour and ask for their support.
– Plan ahead – work out a list of things you can do instead of drinking/using and ways to reward yourself for change eg alternate use for the money you would have spent
– Prepare yourself for handling risky situations and managing urges or cravings
HANDLING HIGH RISK SITUATIONS

When you are trying to address your drug or alcohol use, ‘high-risk situations’ are the thing most likely to undermine your efforts to change. You need to have identified them (see above) so you can either avoid or prepare some strategies in advance to handle them.

Some common high-risk situations are also described by the acronym, HALT:

Hungry – if you haven’t eaten well
Angry – if you’ve had a tough day
Lonely – if you’re feeling isolated
Tired – from all of the above

As a result, strongest cravings can often occur at the end of the day. Take some time to think of ways you might handle your HALTs without drinking or drug use.

People. That is, people who encourage you to use either directly or indirectly. They might include people who you use with or who are related to your use. They might also be people whom you have conflicts with or with whom you celebrate.

Places. Places where you drink or use or where you get your drugs or alcohol (e.g., certain clubs, pubs, café’s).

Things. Things that remind you of drinking/using.

EXERCISE

Using the pointers above, add to your list of your high-risk situations and make a plan for dealing with them.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>High Risk Situation</th>
<th>Plan to manage it</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Eg feeling angry</td>
<td>Go for a run (rather than reach for a drink)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meeting friends for drinks</td>
<td>Set a limit to drinks, a time to leave, limit my money</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party with drug using friends</td>
<td>Avoid it – go out with other friends instead!</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Here are some further ideas about how you might deal with some high-risk situations:

- Taking a break from old drinking or drug-using friends – spend your time with people who support your decision to change rather than those who would tempt you into those old, destructive habits.
- Avoid your favourite bars and clubs for a while and remove any reminders of your drinking/drug use from your room.
- Have a list of emergency people to call for support if you need them.
EXTRA TIPS FOR MANAGING BINGE DRINKING

How much you drink is your choice. Try these strategies to help you keep to healthier limits:

- **Alternate** non-alcoholic drinks with alcoholic drinks.
- **Finish** your drink before topping it up so you can count your drinks and stop at your goal.
- **Drink slowly** – over 2-3 hours.
- Try drinks with a **lower** alcohol content.
- **Eat** before and while you are drinking.
- **Don’t mix** alcohol and other drugs.
- **Don’t drink by yourself**.
- Try having days and weekends **without drinking**.
- Avoid drinking if you have university or work the **next day**.

COPING WITH CRAVINGS AND URGES

Try the following:

- **Distraction and de-stressing**: Reading, going to a movie, exercising or doing something relaxing (calming music, hot bath) can take your mind off your craving.
- **Urge Surf!** Imagine yourself as a surfer riding the wave of your drug craving, staying on top of it until it crests, breaks, and turns into less powerful, foamy surf. See also: managing your uncomfortable feelings.
- **Challenge your thoughts**: When experiencing a craving, many people have a tendency to remember only the positive effects of the drug or alcohol and forget the negative consequences. Therefore, you may find it helpful to remind yourself of the benefits and consequences and list them on a small card that you keep with you.
- **Build a solid support system**: Talking to friends or family can be helpful.

BUILD A MEANINGFUL SUBSTANCE-FREE LIFE

When your life is filled with rewarding activities and a sense of purpose, old, less helpful habits start to lose their appeal. For example:

- **Get involved** or pick up a new hobby. Do things that challenge your creativity and spark your imagination—something you’ve always wanted to try. Replace your substance use with interesting groups and activities. **Volunteer**, become active in your community or **join a uni club or society**.
- **Adopt a pet**. Caring for an animal makes you feel loved and needed. Pets can also get you out of the house for exercise!
- **Set meaningful goals**: Having goals to work toward and something to look forward to are **anticdotes to drug / alcohol misuse**. It doesn’t matter what the goals are - whether they involve your career, your personal life, or your health - just that they are important to you.
- **Look after your health**: Regular exercise, adequate sleep, and healthy eating habits help you keep your energy levels up and your stress levels down.

LEARN HEALTHY WAYS TO COPE WITH STRESS

Drug or alcohol misuse often stem from misguided attempts to manage stress or painful emotions. There are however, healthier ways to deal with these conditions. When you’re no longer using substances to cover up painful or uncomfortable emotions you will be in a better position to learn to manage them, and, if necessary, seek any help you need.
Learning anything new involves making some slip-ups and mistakes. Don’t be discouraged if this happens, it does not mean you have failed or relapsed. In fact, a slip-up is a natural part of the process of learning to change your behaviour. Use the slip-up to review where you went wrong so that you will be able to avoid that trap in the future.

**FURTHER RESOURCES**

**Smart recovery** provides cognitive-behavioural support programs

**NCPIC** provides a workbook for quitting cannabis

**OnTrack Alcohol** is an online program which aims to help people cut back on their drinking. The program was written by psychologists and uses methods shown by research to be helpful.

**GETTING HELP**

You may be able to reduce or stop your alcohol or drug use on your own but it may also be useful to speak with trusted family member or friend. Doctors and counsellors can also help. Check out the section below to find services near you.

**Alcohol Drug Information Service (ADIS)**
NSW
24hr referrals and counselling: 02 9361 8000

**Family Drug Support (FDS)**
24hr support to families in crisis due to drug and alcohol issues.
Tel: 1300 368 186 or visit the website at [www.fds.org.au](http://www.fds.org.au)
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