

feeling good?



answering your questions about
alcohol, drugs and mental health

This pamphlet answers frequently asked questions about alcohol, drugs and mental health. You've taken the first step by picking up this pamphlet—the next step is to talk to someone about any issues it raises for you.

You could try talking to your friends or family or there is a list of other contacts provided at the back of the pamphlet.

Are all drugs bad for you?

Most people know someone who has used drugs. You may know a bit about drugs and their effects and you may be aware that drugs affect different people in many different ways. Whether a drug can harm you depends on which drug it is, the situation where you use it and how much you use.

Read on to learn about the specific effects of drugs on your mental health.

- **All drugs can cause harm in some way. The extent to which a drug can harm you depends on which drug it is, where you use the drug and how much you use.**

What is a mental illness?

How do I know if I have one?

We talk about mental illness when someone gets so anxious, worried or depressed about things they no longer function well at school, work or with friends. Sometimes mental illness can be even more severe with the person having strange beliefs and experiences.

Mental illnesses are common and affect about one in five people in the course of their lives. Chances are you will know someone who has one.

Why people develop mental illnesses is not always clear. It seems to be a combination of stressful factors in the environment as well as factors within the individual person.

People who use drugs have much higher rates of mental illness. Sometimes mental illness may develop when a person has a strong reaction to a particular drug. More often, it occurs when the person has begun to use too much of the drug.

Read on for more detailed descriptions of the sorts of mental problems people can have.

Anxiety

One in four people experience problems with anxiety some time in their life. They can include:

- **feeling worried**
- **getting tired easily**
- **unable to concentrate**
- **feeling irritable**
- **irregular heartbeats or palpitations**
- **dizziness**
- **muscle tensions and pains**
- **panic attacks which are sudden surges of anxiety involving shortness of breath, dizziness, heart racing, butterflies, unreality, light headedness and fear that you might die or go crazy or lose control.**

Depression

Some of the symptoms of depression are:

- **feeling sad or depressed**
- **a loss of interest and pleasure in normal activities**
- **loss of appetite or weight**
- **sleep problems**
- **feeling tired all the time**
- **having trouble concentrating, feeling restless**
- **feeling worthless or guilty**
- **feeling that life isn't worth living**

People with depression feel extremely sad, dejected and often unmotivated. Depressed people also often feel irritable and have physical symptoms such as chronic pain, insomnia and fatigue. Depression is not just feeling sad or down, but is a serious mental illness. One in four women and one in six men will have depression at some time in their life.

Anxiety and depression often go together and share some of their symptoms.

Psychosis

Psychotic illnesses include schizophrenia, bipolar disorder and some severe forms of depression. There are other related illnesses and diagnoses and often it is not easy to give a name to the underlying illness which causes the severe symptoms. What these illnesses have in common is that people have what is called psychosis where the person loses contact with reality. Their thinking becomes confused and disjointed and they experience strange delusions and hallucinations. Delusions are false beliefs whilst hallucinations involve hearing, seeing, feeling, smelling or tasting something that is not really there.

When a person is psychotic they do not know that these things are not real—they believe what their mind and senses tell them—just like everyone else does. These illnesses can be managed and people can recover for long periods of time, or in some cases for good, with the help of good social supports, education and medication.

What's wrong with drinking if it makes me stress less?

Alcohol is a drug that people use to help them relax socially, such as when friends get together. Sometimes people use alcohol to deal with worries or when they are feeling anxious or miserable. Alcohol may help for a while. But if someone really has a depression or anxiety problem, alcohol only covers up the symptoms. After the effects of drinking wear off, those symptoms come back, and could even be worse. You can even get anxious and depressed while you are drinking.

- **If you have anxiety or depressive symptoms, it is not a good solution to wipe them out with alcohol. Drinking alcohol may end up making your symptoms worse.**

alcohol

If someone has a mental illness, will drinking make it worse?

Drinking small amounts of alcohol is not likely to cause problems for someone with a mental illness. Drinking too much has the same effects as on everybody else, namely increased depression, anxiety, insomnia, as well as affecting their social relationships. Alcohol can also reduce inhibitions and increase the risk of a person harming themselves, especially if drinking alone. If you have a mental illness you are in a more vulnerable situation because these symptoms may lead to relapse of your mental illness and possible hospitalisation.

For a person with mental illness, just like with everyone else, it is important to look after your mind and body and keep up good relationships with your friends, family and other supports. A good hint is to try to keep track of how much you are drinking and not to drink to wipe yourself out. It is also not a good idea to drink alone.

- **Drinking too much can make your mental illness worse.**

IS IT BAD TO MIX ALCOHOL AND OTHER DRUGS (INCLUDING MEDICATION)?

Different drugs act on the brain in different ways. It is not a good idea to mix drugs. Mixing alcohol with other drugs such as speed, ecstasy and heroin can have very serious consequences. The effects of mixing can be unpredictable depending on how much of each drug you have taken. Mixing alcohol with speed or ecstasy can cause problems such as cramps and headaches. Drugs like sleeping pills when mixed with alcohol can cause your central nervous system to slow down and in some cases you could stop breathing.

If you are on medication for anything (physical or mental), it is most important that you check with your doctor about what other drugs you can safely use.

- **Avoid mixing alcohol with illegal or prescription drugs as the combination can have unpredictable and negative effects.**
- **To find out what effect alcohol may have on your medication, talk to your doctor.**

Can people smoke cannabis and not have any problems?

Some people experience unpleasant effects when they use cannabis such as anxiety and panic. Others may experience hallucinations (seeing, hearing and feeling things that are not really there). Many of these unpleasant effects disappear after the cannabis wears off, but they can be very frightening and in some people they keep on happening.

One in ten people who ever use cannabis will have problems with it and may become addicted to it. Young people who are daily or near daily cannabis users are more likely to experience problems such as psychotic symptoms and depression.

- **The earlier in life and more frequently you use cannabis, the more likely you are to continue using and develop problems.**
- **Some people who use cannabis regularly become addicted to the drug.**

Should you smoke cannabis if you've been told you have psychosis?

People who have a mental illness such as schizophrenia or bipolar are more likely to experience the negative psychological effects of cannabis and should try to avoid using it.

Many people who use cannabis also use other drugs at the same time, including alcohol. This makes it much more likely for them to experience another psychosis. Studies have found that people with severe mental illness tend to relapse and have to go back into hospital more often if they use cannabis, especially in large amounts.

- **If a person has psychosis, cannabis can make some of their symptoms worse.**

Can cannabis make you mad or paranoid?

Research is increasingly pointing in a direction that cannabis can be a key to unlocking the door to psychosis in some people. Certain people are more at risk for this than others. If anyone in your family has a psychosis, cannabis use might trigger an episode. The problem is that you may not be aware that you are at risk.

One in seven people who use cannabis experience psychotic symptoms such as delusions and hallucinations. They are also probably at greatest risk of developing a psychosis and should be encouraged to cease use.

- **If a person has ever had a psychotic episode or if they have a family history of mental illness, then they should avoid using cannabis. It might trigger problems.**

Can people hear voices or get paranoid because they use speed?

Speed (amphetamines) can make the symptoms of mental illness worse or bring them back when a person has been well for some time. People with no mental illness can experience an overdose which is called speed psychosis. This is brought on by using too much speed which can cause toxic blood levels of the drug.

Speed psychosis is like a sudden attack of paranoia where you become frightened of things and people around you for no good reason. Some people may hear voices or see things that aren't really there. This can be very distressing, but it will usually go away once the drug leaves your body. This can take a couple of days but some people still have symptoms up to three months afterwards. If you use speed again these symptoms may come back.

- **Speed can make the symptoms of mental illness much worse.**
- **Speed overdose can give you symptoms such as paranoia.**

Ecstasy just makes you feel good—so what's the problem?

Ecstasy has some pleasant short-term effects such as feeling high and wanting to be close to other people. It can also make you feel things more intensely.

Once these effects wear off, you can be left with a 'hangover' or 'come down' which can last for days, where you have trouble sleeping, you feel unhappy, your muscles ache and you have difficulty concentrating. It may also have some more lasting effects such as anxiety, depression, paranoia, psychotic symptoms and panic attacks. For some people these effects can last a few months, for others they last a lifetime.

There is a lot we still don't know about ecstasy and its effects.

- **Ecstasy can make you feel good but these effects wear off and can leave an unpleasant hangover to cope with.**
- **Ecstasy can have some serious long-term effects on your mental health as well.**

Is there a relationship between heroin use and mental health?

Some, but not all people who use heroin may experience anxiety and depression. People who are dependent on heroin for prolonged periods of time can also experience lifestyle problems and isolation that can lead to trauma and stress related illnesses. It is still unclear whether these mental illnesses appear before or after using heroin.

If you use heroin frequently, you may become physically and psychologically dependent on the drug. You are also at risk of increased harm from an overdose if you use heroin together with prescription drugs. If you are on prescription drugs and using heroin, talk to someone you trust such as a worker at your local needle & syringe program or another health professional about the risks.

- **Regular heroin use may have serious consequences for your physical and mental health.**
- **Mixing heroin and prescription drugs increases the risk of overdose.**

Why do so many people with mental health problems smoke cigarettes?

Many people with anxiety problems are also more likely to be cigarette smokers. There are two different theories that could explain this.

One is that many people smoke cigarettes because they think that smoking calms you down when you are anxious. There is not a lot of evidence to support this. It has been suggested that people think this way because smoking stops the jitters associated with withdrawal from smoking and so people might mistake this for calming them down.

The second theory is that smoking may increase your chance of having an anxiety disorder. Studies have found that heavy smoking is particularly associated with some anxiety disorders. It has also been found that stopping smoking is related to lessening of anxiety symptoms.

Although smoking has not been found to cause depression, people with depression are amongst the heaviest smokers.

- **Smoking may lead to some people's anxiety disorders.**

Is it true that nothing can really help you stop smoking?

A lot of people believe that it's impossible for them to give up smoking. Yet we know lots of people who manage it. There are many ways to stop smoking, but stopping suddenly has been found to be more effective than giving up gradually.

It has also been found that nicotine replacement therapies such as chewing gum or patches can just about double your chances of success. There are also some drugs used to treat depression which have been found to be very helpful for giving up. They can stop you wanting to smoke before you give up and get rid of the withdrawal symptoms after you give up. These need to be prescribed by a doctor.

It is a good idea to have an overall give-up smoking plan which ideally would include some sort of counselling and support to help you through.

tobacco

- **There are useful supports to help you give up smoking. You do not have to do it on your own.**

What can I do if I think I have a problem?

Often the first thing that helps people is talking to someone you can trust. This might be a close friend or family member, your doctor or someone at lifeline.

There are lots of services that can help if you think you have a problem with alcohol, drugs and mental health. Some of these are listed at the end of this pamphlet.

What can I do?

How do I cope with feeling bad about my problems?

It is common for people with a mental disorder or a problem with drugs to want to keep the problem to themselves. But really these are health problems just like any other illness. You should not feel that in some way you are to blame or that you do not have the right to treatment.

If you have to take medication for your problems, think of it like people with diabetes. They have to take medication every day in order to stay alive and healthy and they generally are treated very sympathetically by everyone else.

It is important that you see clearly that it is not your fault, because only then are you in a position to influence the views of the people around you. Also, it helps you to be able to see your problems clearly, so that you can maintain a good recovery.

If you have any of these problems then talk to your doctor or contact one of the places listed in this pamphlet.

what can I do?

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Additional copies of this pamphlet can be obtained from the Population Health Division, Department of Health and Ageing by calling **1800 020 103** (ask for PHD publications on extension **8654**) or by email on phd.publications@health.gov.au



How can I get help?

There are many ways that you can get help. You could start off by talking to trusted friends or relatives or by seeing a doctor. The doctor can give you more information or refer you on to another professional.

However if this does not suit you, there are lots more options.

For a start you can phone the following numbers from anywhere in Australia:

- SANE Helpline: Phone **1800 18 SANE (7263)**
- Lifeline: Phone **13 11 14**
- Kid's Help Line: Phone **1800 551 800**
- Quitline (for help with quitting smoking): Phone **13 18 48**

And from within your State you can telephone the following services:

NSW:

Alcohol & Drug Information Service (ADIS): (02) **9361 8000** or **1800 442 599** (toll free)

VIC:

Directline: (03) **9416 1818** or **1800 888 236** (toll free)

SA:

Alcohol & Drug Information Service (ADIS): **1300 131 340**

WA:

Alcohol & Drug Information Service (ADIS): (08) **9442 5000** or **1800 198 024** (toll free)

QLD:

Alcohol & Drug Information Service (ADIS): (07) **3236 2414** or **1800 177 833** (toll free)

TAS:

Alcohol & Drug Information Service (ADIS): (03) **6230 7901** or **1800 811 994** (toll free)

ACT:

Alcohol & Drug Information Service (ADIS): (02) **6207 9977**

NT:

Alcohol and Other Drug Service: (08) **8922 8399** or **1800 131 350** (toll free)

There are also some helpful websites which give information and guidance. Some are:

- Beyondblue (or YBBlue):
<http://www.beyondblue.org.au>
- MoodGYM:
<http://moodgym.anu.edu.au>
- depressionNet:
<http://www.depressionnet.com.au>
- Australian Drug Information Network:
<http://www.adin.com.au>
- Reach Out!:
<http://www.reachout.com.au>