



Reflect and discuss

# Substance use health



Humans have been using alcohol, cannabis, and other psychoactive substances for thousands of years. Why is that? Are they helpful or harmful? Or does it just depend on the person, the substance and the situation?

Substance use is deeply embedded in the fabric of many societies. Many of us use drugs to celebrate successes or to help us deal with grief, pain and sadness. We use drugs to mark rites of passage and to pursue spiritual insight. We use drugs to get going and to unwind. In short, substances are still used as aids to daily life.

Each one of us has our own unique relationships with substances, which can change throughout our lives. Most of us start by experimenting with a substance for fun, or because we heard it could help in some way. But here are the most common reasons we use drugs:

**Pleasure** - Most psychoactive substances produce feelings of pleasure.

**Curiosity** - We're strongly influenced by what the people around us are doing.

**Social interaction** - Drug use can be a way to build connections with others.

**Relief** - Some people with social anxiety or stress use drugs to feel calm and steady.

People with experience with trauma or depression may use drugs to prevent feelings of distress.

**Performance** - Pressure to improve or go to 'the next level' leads many people to use substances for focus and endurance.

Substance use is **complex** and has the potential to both **help and harm** us.

This is because each of us has a different combination of genetics, life experiences, influences, and personality traits that make up who we are.

Just as we all have some degree of mental health, we also have substance use health.

In other words, we all fit somewhere on **the substance use continuum**, featuring 'no use' on one end and 'substance use disorder' on the other.

**Abstinence**





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Most people don't plan for their drug use to become a problem or even part of their lifestyle. But it can happen anyway.

### For example:

- A person experiencing abuse or bullying might self-medicate with alcohol for much longer than is helpful.
- Or, a person with a physical condition may accidentally develop a problem with painkillers or other prescription drugs after using them for too long.
- Or, a person may live, study or work with peers who use cannabis or tobacco every day, so it becomes their daily practice too, even if they don't really want it to.

Considering where we sit on the substance use continuum reminds us we can change our substance use if things aren't working out for us.

### Activity steps

1. Watch the Substance use health video.
2. Working in pairs, small groups or individually, explore and discuss the contents of this handout
3. Play the Factors Game to test your understanding of substance use health.

### Reflect, discuss and play!

#### Factors game

- What was it like to play the game?
- On a scale of 1 - 10, how easy was it for your group to come to consensus on the scenarios? (1 = very easy, 10 = difficult)
- Did anything surprise you? What is one thing you learned while playing?

### References

- [University of Victoria: Cannabis resources](#)
- [Here To Help: You and substance use. People use drugs](#)
- [Here to Help Understanding Substance Use: A Health Promotion Perspective](#)

### Resources

- [YMCA Cannabis Hub: Cannabis Awareness Resources](#)
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- [Substance Use and Addictions Program](#)
- [CSSDP - https://cssdp.org/resources/](https://cssdp.org/resources/)
- [Get Sensible- https://getsensible.org/](https://getsensible.org/)