



The coronavirus (COVID-19) has resulted in sudden changes in our lives. This has been a difficult time for many, with greater levels of isolation, stress and uncertainty. This type of distress increases the chance that some of us will begin or increase the use of alcohol or other drugs to cope. The use of alcohol and drugs, however, can have a negative impact on mental health, physical health and brain health. Here are some basic facts and strategies to help you manage your substance use while coping with the challenges of COVID-19.

A healthy brain helps us to:

- listen, speak and understand
- remember
- act appropriately
- make decisions
- feel
- move.

If our brain is not working as well as it could, some of our daily thinking, feelings, experiences/perceptions and behaviours can become affected. For example we may:

- find it difficult to concentrate
- feel irritable
- forget small things easily
- feel confused and disorganised.

Using alcohol and/or drugs not only affects our mental wellbeing but it can also have a negative effect on our brain and physical health. This is particularly the case with frequent and heavy use. When we are feeling down, anxious, frustrated or distressed, we need to be careful to monitor our use, so it does not increase to harmful levels.

What do we know about the harms of alcohol and other drugs?

We know that different drugs, whether legal or illicit, can have different impacts in the immediate and long-term. This includes prescription medication.

Drugs can be classed into groups based on their action on our brain and central nervous system, which then impacts our thinking, feeling and behaviour.

- Sedatives (also known as depressants) include alcohol, benzodiazepines (e.g., Valium), cannabis and heroin/opioids (like Tramadol and methadone).
- Stimulants include methamphetamine, coffee, cocaine and prescription medications like Ritalin.
- Hallucinogens which cause sensations or images that seem real but are not include, for example, LSD and psilocybin or magic mushrooms.

Different drugs have different effects but there are some common ways they can affect our thinking, feeling and behaviour, which may increase the risk of harm to ourselves and others including:

- taking more than you are used to leading to overdose, panic, agitation and even psychosis
- making more impulsive and poor decisions such as drink/drug driving, unsafe sex, fights with family members/friends, and poor parenting
- combining alcohol and other drugs including prescription medication that can lead to more pronounced effects and an increased risk of overdose resulting in death
- experiencing hangovers and withdrawal from drugs including feelings of anxiety, depression and fatigue

- withdrawing too suddenly from using a drug such as alcohol or benzodiazepines, which can result in seizures and possibly death.

There are also long-term harms from extended use:

- Alcohol increases the risk of many cancers, liver problems and can cause brain damage.
- Heroin use and escalating use of other opiates or sedatives (even prescription pain killers) increase the risk of overdose and death.
- Stimulants can increase the risk of dental problems, cardiac issues, stroke and psychosis.
- Long-term benzodiazepine use is related to reduced thinking skills such as memory loss and possible brain damage as well as the risk of death through overdose.

Daily use of alcohol or other drugs over a period of time can negatively affect thinking skills such as attention, memory, speed of thinking and problem-solving. Simpler tasks become more difficult over time, and a person may become confused and disoriented. As a result, we might be more easily overwhelmed and make poor decisions, particularly when stressed about other things.

Using alcohol and other drugs can also decrease our body's ability to fight infections. This may be important if you are exposed to the COVID-19 virus. Alcohol reduces immunity, and anything we inhale impacts our lung capacity and function.

How to reduce the risk of harm from alcohol and other drug use

Alcohol

The national guidelines in Australia advise staying within the following recommended limits in order to decrease the risk of harm from alcohol:

- No more than two standard drinks per day and no more than four standard drinks on any one occasion.
- Have two alcohol-free days per week.
- Do not drink while pregnant or under 18 years of age.
- Make sure you eat before drinking.
- Alternate a drink with a glass of water, and pouring your own drink can help you keep track of what you are drinking.
- Do not mix alcohol with other drugs.

Other drugs

- Use the smallest amount of a drug possible and monitor the effect before you take more.
- If using prescribed medication, only take the prescribed amount (what it says on the packet), not more. Do not take someone else's medication.
- Do not use drugs alone; this may decrease the risk of harm to yourself.
- Use clean needles/access a syringe-exchange program.
- Do not share equipment such as needles or bongs/pipes.
- Have take-home naloxone, if you or your loved ones use opiates/heroin, to reverse the effect of overdose. There are services that can assist you with how to use naloxone appropriately.

What to do if you notice changes in your thinking and memory skills?

- Reduce your use of any alcohol or other drugs.
- Get regular exercise: Research indicates that exercising outdoors in a natural environment has positive effects on mood and thinking skills.
- Ensure you are getting enough sleep.
- Pay attention to your mental health and get help if you need it.
- Eat well. Research indicates that a healthy diet consisting of lots of fruit, vegetables, nuts and grains can boost health and wellbeing including immunity.

The APS has a number of resources available to assist Australians in managing their mental health during the coronavirus outbreak.

Visit psychology.org.au for more.

When to seek help

Seek help as soon as you are concerned. Sometimes, it may be your friends or family that may alert you that there is a problem; take their concerns seriously.

Where to seek help

- Your GP is a good place to start.
- Some people find apps like 'Hello Sunday Morning' useful.
- Every Australian state and territory has a dedicated alcohol and drug helpline.
- Some people find groups such as Alcoholic Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous or SMART Recovery helpful – many are online or live-streamed. It can be worth trying a few different groups to see which might better suit your needs.
- There are a wide range of support services and facilities to help people who want to change including counselling, detox, case management and nursing support. Most organisations are still providing services. Contact your local alcohol and other drug intake service to find out what is available in your area.
- The Australian Drug Foundation is a helpful website. It has fact sheets and information on services in your state: bit.ly/3buASeh.
- A psychologist with specialist training can also help you to address your alcohol and other drug issues. Contacting your GP is a good starting point to access a psychologist. There are many different types of psychologists with varied training backgrounds and skill-sets, therefore you can select the type of psychologist that is specific to your needs. For example, if your needs are specific to the impact of alcohol and drugs on your brain function and changes to your abilities, you may wish to seek the advice of a neuropsychologist or you may require a psychologist with drug and alcohol management expertise. During the COVID-19 pandemic, a telehealth option may be available through Medicare.

Access a psychologist

- Use the Australia-wide Find a Psychologist service. To access the service go to findapsychologist.org.au or call 1800 333 497
- Ask your GP or another health professional to refer you

Acknowledgments




This resource was prepared by the:



A clinical neuropsychologist is a psychologist who is trained to understand brain-behaviour relationships (across the lifespan):

- To assess thinking/brain abilities and difficulties to clarify diagnosis and identify the client's care needs and priorities
- To provide targeted intervention or rehabilitation for people with thinking/brain-related difficulties or disorders
- To adapt or modify treatments to take into account the effects of thinking/brain difficulties

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