



connect

wellbeing, ability, recovery

Drug Use & Mental Health

Information, guidance and advice

Mental health means different things to different people. You may think of control, happiness, contentment, order etc. Good mental health is usually a sign of a positive way of life. Mental ill health is the opposite of this – it causes problems and creates barriers to being happy. Your frame of mind may vary between the two as mental health can change. It can be affected by external influences, and one of these is drugs.

Drugs that are psychoactive, such as cannabis, alcohol, ecstasy and heroin, have the ability to affect your mood. They can arouse certain emotions or dampen down others. This may be why you use them. The changes in your mood or behaviour caused by drugs are the result of changes to your brain. This is also the part of you that controls your mental health.

Drugs interfere with the chemicals in your brain. This affects the messages those chemicals are trying to send. You need to weigh up both the short-term and long-term effects that drugs can have on your mental health. The short-term effects may well be something you enjoy – but probably only if they happen like you expect them to. You may also have unwanted short-term drug-induced side effects, such as acting or feeling strange. These are short-term because they pass as the drug leaves your system.

Drugs can have a longer-lasting impact on your mental health too, and you need to think seriously about your own strengths and vulnerabilities. Consider whether you use drugs to make bad feelings go away and whether you are in control of your use. Even if you start using drugs with a clear mind they may still affect your mental health. Drugs can simply expose bad feelings you never knew you had. Unwanted effects may stay with you because you have a pre-existing mental health condition you were not aware of. Or you may get the dose very wrong and permanently disrupt a chemical balance in your brain.

Short-term effects of drugs on mental health

All psychoactive drugs may cause mental health problems while you are taking them and as you clear the drug from your body. These can include anxiety, mood swings, depression, sleep problems and psychosis (see below).

DRUG-INDUCED ANXIETY DISORDER

You may have panic attacks – periods of very severe anxiety when your heart rate increases, with trembling, sweats, shortness of breath, and a fear of losing control. You may also feel like your surroundings are strange and unreal, or that you are losing your personal identity and sense of reality.

DRUG-INDUCED PSYCHOSIS

Psychoactive drugs can cause delusions – you believe things that aren't true, or hallucinations – you see or hear things that are not there.

DRUG-INDUCED MOOD DISORDER

You may have times when you feel depressed – sad, restless, irritable, tired, loss of pleasure, or manic – elevated mood, delusions, impulsive behaviour, racing thoughts. This is called mood disorder and may be caused by drugs such as cocaine, amphetamines, heroin and methadone, to name a few. Many drugs can impact on mood both illegal and legal / prescribed.



Long-term effects of drugs on mental health

Psychoactive drugs may cause you ongoing mental health problems. It is not clear why this happens to some people and not others. It may be that using a drug has triggered a mental illness you didn't know you had, or the drug changes the way a certain chemical affects your brain functions.

Living with a dual diagnosis

A dual diagnosis is when you have two separate conditions – a mental health problem and a drug addiction. This means that health services need to work together to best provide care. When trying to deal with both an addiction and a mental health disorder it is hard to know where one ends and the other begins. It may not be clear which came first. People with mental health problems sometimes use drugs to cope with the chaos, the bad emotions and the stigma of conditions such as depression or schizophrenia. But turning to drugs to cope with mental health problems can lead to complications of the illness and interfere with prescribed medication you are taking.

The mental health problems that most often occur with drug misuse are depression, schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, anxiety disorder and attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).

Risk Factors

- Attention Deficit Disorder - Having ADHD makes it more likely that an individual will initiate substance misuse at a younger age
- Self-medication theory - People with severe mental illnesses misuse substances in order to relieve a specific set of symptoms and counter the negative side-effects
- Multiple risk factor theory - There may be risk factors that can lead to both substance abuse and mental illness such as social isolation, poverty, lack of structured daily activity, lack of adult role responsibility, living in areas with high drug availability, and association with people who already misuse drugs.

Managing drug use

Managing your drug use can be a big step and it may be helpful / necessary for you to talk to a professional. Some professionals specialise in drug and alcohol treatment, however all should be able to offer you help, guidance, information or access services. A substance misuse specialist can help you to work out how best to manage your drug intake, refer to specialist services and implement a care plan aimed at addressing your individual needs. Self-help is another form of treatment for people who have drug dependencies. There are many self help resources available eg. work books, leaflets and websites.



How drugs impact

- Drug use can trigger a mental health problem or make an existing problem worse. The results can be serious or even fatal.
- Use of amphetamines can trigger psychosis or delirium (mental confusion). Regular use may lead to sleeping problems, anxiety or depression.
- Cannabis worsens the symptoms of existing mental health problems and makes you more likely to develop a mental health problem, especially psychosis, in the long term.
- Cocaine use can cause depression, anxiety, paranoia and panic attacks, as well as psychosis.
- Ecstasy use can cause personality change, memory loss, difficulty concentrating, anxiety, nervousness, hallucinations, tiredness, paranoia and depression in the short term. Depression is also common when the effects of ecstasy wear off.
- Heroin is highly addictive. People with a mental health problem who use heroin are likely to make their symptoms worse and also limit the effectiveness of any treatment.

Advice and Getting Help

Getting the correct help and support is crucial to the recovery and success of anyone with issues linked to drug and substance misuse. We would advise anyone who is experiencing problems with drugs to seek help and support immediately. Involving your GP is strongly advised as your GP has a wide variety of services available and can also check to see if you require medical assistance as well as therapeutic support. The community and voluntary sector provides excellent services in partnership with statutory care providers.

Below is a range of info and treatment services available:

Talk to Frank - <https://www.talktofrank.com/>

Addiction NI - <http://addictionni.com/>

Drugs and Alcohol NI - <https://www.drugsandalcoholni.info/>





Discover more information on our website:

www.inspireconnect.info