

Substance misuse

Understanding Treatment Options



Anna Freud
building the
mental wellbeing
of the next
generation

What is substance misuse?

Misusing or abusing drugs can have serious effects on your mental and physical health, and can harm your wellbeing, education, work and relationships. Substance misuse is more common between the ages of 20-25 years old, and can be a response to personal issues or trauma, or might have started as a way to experiment.

Nicotine (through smoking cigarettes or vaping) and alcohol are the most common substances people use to change how they feel. While both of these can result in addiction, they are legal for adults. Some other 'legal' substances (e.g. household products or medicines) can also be dangerous if they are misused. Illegal drugs include cannabis, amphetamines, ecstasy, cocaine and solvents. These substances can all be harmful, for example solvents cause around 50 deaths each year. For more information about the effects and risks of different types of substances, look at the Frank website.

The more you take something, the more likely it is that you will develop a tolerance and need even more to feel the same effects. The danger of becoming hooked increases, and some substances are extremely addictive, such as nicotine or opioid drugs like heroin.

Being addicted to something means you are physically and/or mentally dependent on it. When you're addicted, instead of enjoying something, you need it to function normally and you can experience withdrawal symptoms if you try to stop. This means it can be hard to suddenly stop taking the substance and the need for it can gradually take over your life.

How is substance misuse related to other mental health conditions?

Children and young people who have problems with substance misuse often experience other mental health, social or educational difficulties. Substance misuse can make experiencing mental health conditions more likely, and can contribute to physical health problems too.

Cannabis is probably the most commonly used 'illegal drug' and research has shown that the earlier you start using cannabis the greater the risk to your mental health. Also, if you are already at risk of developing a mental illness such as depression or schizophrenia (because there is a history of this in your family) then using cannabis will add to your risk of developing an illness like this.

Substance use can also affect your relationships with your family and friends, and lead to problems with education and employment. Taking illegal substances can

cause problems with the police and you could get a criminal record. There is also a risk of getting into debt if your substance misuse is out of control or you become involved with dangerous and exploitative groups.

How can I get help?

If you're having difficulties with substance misuse, talk to your GP or another professional (for example one of your teachers at school or college) who will be able to help you find support. As a young person, you will often be seen in a specialist service designed for your age group.

For confidential advice you can visit the Frank website.

In most areas there are specialist substance misuse services for young people and often you will be able to refer yourself. These are usually part of or linked to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS). If you think you may have another mental health condition (such as depression or anxiety) then you should also talk to your GP or another professional about this and they will be able to help you find support for that too.

Planning treatment

The type of treatment you're offered will depend on:

- how you are misusing substances
- how your substance use is affecting you and those around you
- the reasons for your substance use
- whether you are experiencing other difficulties (e.g. mental health difficulties or problems at school)
- your age
- your family circumstances

The aim of your treatment will be to stop using substances completely and to help you with any other difficulties you are experiencing. Your professional might also want to check your physical health and will help you with any withdrawal symptoms.

You might experience withdrawal symptoms if you have been using opiates (such as heroin), so your professional might suggest an opioid detoxification programme. These can help with stopping gradually and might involve staying in hospital. Benzodiazepines can also cause serious withdrawal symptoms, so if you have been taking these your professional might suggest that you stay in hospital for help with gradual withdrawal.

If you have another mental health condition as well as substance misuse then you might be offered support for this at the same time as support to stop taking substances. You might also have support from children's social care while you have treatment for substance use if there are concerns about your safety.

To help you stop using substances, you are most likely to be offered:

- **Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT):** CBT works best if you do not have other difficulties in addition to substance misuse and have plenty of support from your family and social network. Research has found that CBT is more effective if your family are involved.
- **Family based treatments** (also called multi-component treatments): these treatments are usually offered if you do not have good family or social support and/or you have other difficulties in addition to substance misuse. You might also be offered family based treatments if you are younger and your parents need some extra help to support you better or if you need more support to manage CBT. Some family based treatments involve linking up with other parts of your network such as your school or college.

What about my parents or carers?

Treatment for substance misuse is often more effective if your parents or carers are involved and some types of treatment focus on both you and your family as a whole. Your parents or carers might also need to be involved if there are concerns about your safety.

Your professional should talk to you about how much your parents or carers need to be involved and what information might need to be shared with them. This will depend on your age and ability to make your own decisions about your treatment, and your professional should ask for your agreement about involving your parents or carers.

The wellbeing of your parents or carers is important as they may need support and advice themselves. Your professional should help your parents or carers to access any support they need, which could include:

- emotional support
- practical support with your care
- planning in case of emergencies

Transitions between services

Depending on the type of service you are receiving, you might need to move to another service when you are 18. If this is the case then your professional should

support you in getting to know the new team and understanding what to expect from them.

You may also transition to another CAMHS service (e.g. if you move house). If this happens, your professional should work with you to make sure that your care can continue smoothly, and that your new service has all the information they need.

Brief motivational interventions

Some evidence

Brief motivational interventions can be delivered in different ways and are often part of another treatment. For example, if you have an injury related to substance abuse and need to go to A & E then you might be offered a short counselling session lasting 5-10 minutes. This would look at:

- the risks of your substance use
- advice about reducing or stopping using substances
- the help that's available
- any emotional issues around your substance use

Brief motivational interventions might also be delivered over one or two longer sessions and help you to think through the possible benefits and concerns to do with stopping your substance use.

You should not be offered a brief motivational intervention as a standalone treatment for substance misuse. Instead, this type of treatment should be part of your initial assessment or part of other treatments (such as cognitive behavioural therapy or family based treatments).

Cognitive behavioural therapy

Some evidence

Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) is a talking therapy that uses a problem-solving approach to substance misuse. The approach involves identifying unhelpful, unrealistic thoughts and beliefs that may be contributing to your substance use (e.g. “my friends would find me boring if I stopped”).

Once you have identified these thoughts and beliefs, your professional will encourage you to base your behaviour on more realistic and helpful thoughts (e.g. “my real friends will support me”).

CBT can also help you to identify triggers that cause you to use substances, such as:

- stress
- social anxiety
- being in "high-risk" environments, such as clubs and parties

Your CBT therapist will teach you how to avoid certain triggers and how to cope with any triggers that you can't avoid.

CBT is usually delivered as 60 minute sessions once a week for around 12 weeks. There will usually also be some sessions which involve your family. CBT can be more helpful if you do not have other problems in addition to substance misuse and you have good social support (e.g. from your family and friends).

Family based treatments



Some evidence

You might be offered a family based treatment if:

- you have other mental health or social difficulties in addition to substance misuse
- you need extra social support
- CBT doesn't suit you

There are a number of different types of family based interventions. You might be offered interventions called:

- Multidimensional family treatment (MDFT)
- Multisystemic family therapy (MST)
- Strategic family therapy
- Brief functional family therapy

The different types of family based treatments have lots of things in common. For example, they all involve working with your family members on how they can support each other and most will include help with problem solving.

MDFT and MST are the most intensive types of family based treatment and often include one to one sessions with you and the professional, crisis management support and help for you to manage school, college or employment.

- **MDFT** usually involves once weekly family sessions as well as individual sessions between you and your professional. These usually take place over about 12 weeks.
- In **MST** your professional will meet with you and/or your family several times a week according to what you need. MST tends to take place over 3-6 months.

Strategic family therapy and functional family therapy are less intensive with meetings involving you and your family every one or two weeks for about 3 months.

Opioid detoxification (ages 16-17 years)

Some evidence

You could be offered opioid detoxification if you are physically dependent on opiates and are experiencing withdrawal symptoms. This involves agreeing to stop taking all other opiates and instead being offered an opioid substitute called buprenorphine or methadone. Your professional will gradually reduce your dose of the opioid substitute so that you get used to managing with smaller and smaller doses until it is stopped completely. This will help you to avoid experiencing withdrawal symptoms. Your use of opiates and other drugs will be monitored by your healthcare team.

Detoxification can take place at home with support from your local substance misuse team and usually takes up to 12 weeks. Some people are offered opioid detoxification in hospital, which your professional might suggest if:

- you have a severe physical or mental health condition or other difficulties
- you are dependent on benzodiazepines or alcohol as well as opioids
- detoxification at home has not worked

If you are in hospital or residential rehabilitation for opioid detoxification the process will normally last up to 4 weeks.

You and your family will usually be offered psychological support while you stop taking opioids. You should then be offered a psychological treatment (cognitive behavioural therapy or family based treatment) to help you stay off these substances.

Self-help

Insufficient evidence

Self-help can include engaging with voluntary groups such as Narcotics Anonymous or completing internet-based self-help programmes.

Although self-help is often used by adults it should not be offered as your only treatment for substance misuse. Any self-help resources or groups you are offered as part of a treatment should be specifically designed for your age group.