

**Get comfortable...**

**Talking about**

**drugs & alcohol**

**A toolkit for starting uncomfortable conversations.**

# This could be uncomfortable

We get it. Starting a conversation about drug and alcohol use can be daunting. Talking to a mate you're worried about is really hard. It takes a lot of courage. But being there for a friend is so important.

That's why we've created this guide - to give you practical tips and information to help start those difficult but crucial conversations.

This toolkit aims to empower you to speak up when it matters most.

## First things first...

- Young people use drugs and alcohol for various reasons.
- A young person's reason for using drugs and alcohol is influenced by a mix of factors, including their body and brain (biological factors), their thoughts, feelings, and mental health (psychological/emotional factors), and their relationships, community, and environment (social or structural factors).
- The unique mix of a young person's individual traits, the type/s of drug they use, and the environment they use it in can lead to different kinds of harm.

## Take the pressure off

- Focus on expressing care and concern, not accusations or lecturing. Use "I" statements to share how their use is impacting you, such as "I'm worried about you."
- Prepare for the conversation, but don't overthink or script it. Let it be natural. The main thing is that you're reaching out.
- Have resources ready to suggest if your friend is open to seeking help, but don't force. Let them know you'll support them when they're ready.
- Set boundaries to protect your own wellbeing. You can't force someone to change, only encourage and support them.

### We define addiction as:

**Addiction is a chronic health condition, defined by a physical or psychological dependence on drugs and/or alcohol, which is pursued despite harm and negative impact.**

This is general advice only. For further support contact the National Alcohol and Other Drug Hotline on 1800 250 015. For crisis support contact Lifeline on 13 11 14.



# Let's talk about stigma

When you're talking with a friend about drugs and alcohol use, it's important to be aware of stigma.

People experiencing addiction often face negative attitudes and unfair treatment, which can make them feel ashamed and alone. This stigma can stop them from getting the help they need.

As a friend, it's important to offer support without judgment and encourage them to seek help for their wellbeing.

## Taking stock

When you're concerned about a friend's drug or alcohol use, consider the following questions\*:

- 1. Has your friend used any substances in the past three months? If so, how often?**
- 2. Do they use these substances when they're away from their usual social situations or friends, like when they're alone?**
- 3. Has their substance use led to problems with their health, relationships, finances, school, work, or with the police?**
- 4. Has their substance use affected their usual activities, such as school/work attendance, involvement in hobbies or sports, family expectations, or social activities?**
- 5. Has anyone, like a friend or relative, expressed concern or worry about their substance use?**
- 6. Have they tried to cut down on their use but struggled to do so?**

\* University of Adelaide. (2021, December). Alcohol, Smoking, Substance Involvement Screening Test (ASSIST). Adelaide.

If you notice a combination of these signs or if your friend answers "yes" to any of these questions, it may be time to have a caring conversation with them about your concerns and offer support in seeking help.

# Setting the stage

Before talking to your friend about their drug or alcohol use, it's important to get ready for the conversation. Here are some steps you can take:

## Step 1: Get prepared

- Learn about the signs of addiction and what help is available
- Recognise that addiction is complicated and getting well is a journey.
- Plan what you want to say, focusing on showing your care and concern. Use "I" statements, like, "I've noticed some changes and I'm worried about you."
- Be ready for different reactions from your friend, such as relief, denial, anger, or defensiveness, and understand that their reaction is not a reflection of your friendship or your efforts to help.

## Step 2: Choose the right time and place

- Find a safe, private location where you both feel comfortable, and choose a time when you both have enough time to talk without feeling rushed or interrupted.
- Try to ensure that neither you nor your friend is under the influence of drugs or alcohol during the conversation.
- Consider letting your friend know in advance that it's an important conversation, so they can be prepared and available to give you their full attention.

## Step 3: Express your care and concern

- Let them know that you're coming from a place of love and support, using "I" statements to share your observations and feelings.
- Listen actively and without judgment, allowing your friend to share their thoughts and feelings without interrupting or attempting to solve anything straight away.
- Show empathy and support, even if you don't agree with their actions.



## Step 4: Offer support and set boundaries

- Let your friend know that you're there for them and want to help any way you can, like looking into options or going with them to appointments.
- Encourage them to think about getting professional help, like talking to a counsellor or attending a support group.
- Be clear about what you can and can't do to help your friend. Let them know that you cannot enable or ignore dangerous or harmful behaviour.
- Encourage your friend to take responsibility for their actions, while being understanding of the reasons behind them.
- Reassure them of your ongoing support.

### Important note

If you're starting this conversation, especially if you're young, you might need support or guidance too. It's okay to ask for help from a trusted adult or professional. If your friend mentions thoughts of self-harm or suicide, take it seriously and get help right away by contacting a mental health professional, a helpline, or emergency services.

# Taking care of yourself

Supporting a friend can be emotionally challenging. It's important to prioritise your own well-being and self-care throughout this process:

## Set and maintain healthy boundaries

- Be clear about what you are and are not willing to do to support your friend
- Avoid enabling or covering up for your friend's harmful behaviour
- Learn to say "no" when necessary to protect your own health and well-being

## Seek support for yourself

- Talk to a trusted friend, family member, or professional about your own feelings and experiences
- Consider joining a support group for friends and family members
- Engage in activities that help you manage stress and promote self-care, such as exercise, mindfulness, or hobbies



## Recognise the limits of your role

- Understand that you cannot control your friend's behaviour or decisions
- Acknowledge that your friend's wellbeing is ultimately their responsibility
- Let go of any guilt or sense of personal responsibility for their struggles

Taking care of yourself is not selfish; it's essential for maintaining your own well-being and being able to offer meaningful support to your friend.

# Conversation starters

Here are some conversation starters to help you get the ball rolling when talking with your friend:

“Hey, I’ve noticed you haven’t been yourself lately. I’m here to listen if you want to talk about what’s going on.”

“I care about you and our friendship. I’ve noticed some changes that have me a bit worried. I want you to know that I am here to support you.”

“I know we haven’t talked much about this before, but I’ve noticed you’ve been using [substance] more often lately. I’m not here to judge, but I’m concerned about how it might be affecting you.”

“I’ve noticed you’ve been missing a lot of classes/work lately. I’m not trying to pry, but I want to make sure you’re okay. Is there anything I can do to help?”

“I know life can be stressful, and sometimes we turn to substances to cope. If you’re open to it, I’d like to talk about healthier ways we can manage stress together.”

“I’ve noticed you’ve been going through a tough time lately. If you’re struggling with something, I want you to know that I’m here to support you without judgment.”

“If you ever think about making changes to your drug or alcohol use, I’m here to support you, however you need.”

“What does a good day look like for you, and how can we have more of those? How can I be a better friend to you during times when you’re feeling tempted or stressed?”

Approach the conversation with empathy and avoid judgement. The goal is to express your concern, offer support, and encourage your friend to consider seeking help, not to force them to change or make demands. Be prepared for an ongoing dialogue and continue to check in with your friend while taking care of your own well-being in the process.

# Navigating different responses

Your friend's response to your concerns may vary, and it's essential to be prepared for different scenarios:

## If your friend is receptive to your concerns

- Thank them for their openness and honesty
- Offer to help them research treatment options or connect with support services
- Continue to check in with them and offer your ongoing support

## If your friend becomes angry or defensive

- Remain calm and avoid getting into a heated argument
- Reaffirm that your concern comes from a place of caring, not judgement
- Give them space to process the conversation and revisit the topic another time, if you feel it is safe to do

## If your friend is resistant or in denial

- Avoid arguing or trying to convince them that they have a problem
- Reaffirm your care and concern for their well-being
- Let them know that you're available to talk or offer support whenever they're ready
- Encourage them to consider the impact of their substance use on their life and relationships

## If your friend is ready to seek help

- Commend them for their courage and willingness to take this step
- Help them research treatment options and connect with appropriate resources
- Offer to accompany them to appointments or support group meetings
- Celebrate their progress and milestones throughout their journey

Everyone's journey is different, and your friend's response may change over time. The most important thing is to continue offering your support and encouragement while maintaining healthy boundaries for yourself.

# Resources and further support

Across Australia, there are many incredible organisations that offer help and information. Please, don't hesitate to reach out if you need support. You'll be glad you did.

## Where you can get help

There are many resources available to support you and your friend throughout this journey:

### 24/7 support and crisis lines

- Lifeline: 13 11 14
- Kids Helpline: 1800 55 1800
- Family Drug Support: 1300 368 186
- National Alcohol & Other Drug Hotline: 1800 250 015

### Other resources and communities

- [Alcohol & Drug Foundation](#)
- [Counselling Online](#)
- [Family Drug Support](#)
- [Hello Sunday Morning](#)
- [ReachOut](#)
- [Positive Choices](#)

### Youth-specific organisations/ services

- [Sir David Martin Foundation](#)
- [Mission Australia's Triple Care Farm](#)
- [Headspace](#)



Encourage your friend to reach out and access the support they need, and don't hesitate to access support for yourself when needed.

Seeking help for drug and alcohol use is a courageous and transformative step. By being a compassionate and informed ally, you're playing an important role in your friend's journey towards a healthier, happier life.



# The facts

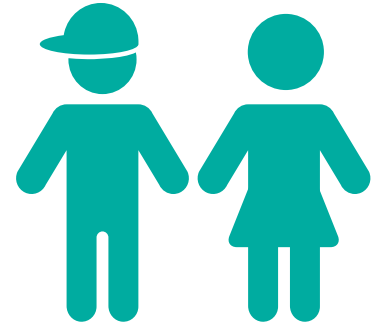
## Australian secondary students aged 12-17:



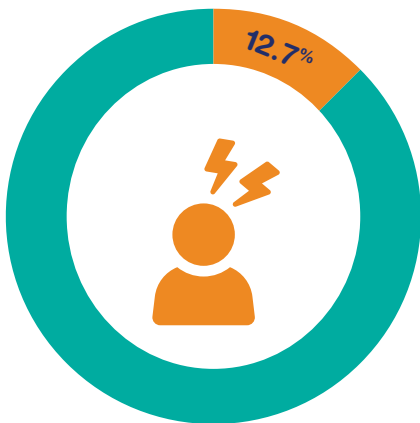
**74%**  
have  
experimented  
with alcohol

**15%**  
have dabbled in  
cannabis use

**17%**  
have engaged  
in inhalant  
abuse



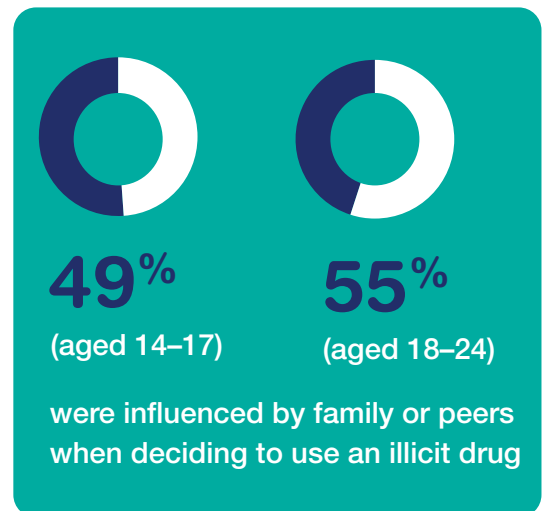
**18-25yrs**  
are the most likely age  
group to have used  
illicit drugs recently.



**12.7%**  
of Australian  
youth aged 16-24  
are estimated to  
have a substance  
use disorder.



**By age 20**  
approximately  
half of people  
with substance  
use disorders  
start experiencing  
issues by age 20.



**49%**  
(aged 14-17)

**55%**  
(aged 18-24)

were influenced by family or peers  
when deciding to use an illicit drug



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Sir David Martin Foundation helps young people in crisis by enabling best practice models of treatment for youth drug and alcohol addiction.

To find out more about the Foundation, visit: [martinfoundation.org.au](http://martinfoundation.org.au)

Sir David Martin Foundation thanks Mission Australia, our service partner, Mission Australia owns and runs Triple Care Farm and the Aftercare programs for Youth Network.