

Managing substance use during Covid-19

With so many changes in work and home life during the Covid-19 pandemic, many people are finding their alcohol or other drug use has increased. While this is not unusual in times of adjustment, sustained increases can add to pressure on our health, relationships, finances and other priorities.

Where are you at?

Take stock of where your substance use is right now and whether it's more than you would like it to be. There is no need for judgement or self-criticism, just an honest evaluation. There may be any number of reasons your use has increased, for example:

- Anxiety or uncertainty
- Concern about loved ones
- Concern about job security or finances
- Feeling bored or under-stimulated
- Loss of other coping strategies or self-care
- Decrease in workload or unemployment
- Increase in unstructured time
- Feeling grief for loss of loved ones, work or other important parts of life
- Increased use by others in the home
- Feeling like life is short
- Having more available after stocking up
- Wanting relief from over thinking
- Feeling stressed
- Wanting a break from tension in the home
- Loss of external constraints or moderators
- Wanting to turn a difficult time into more of a holiday feeling.

What is the underlying need you are trying to meet?

People often use substances to meet one of two main needs: reduce discomfort or increase stimulation. In that sense it's just a tool, an option that is used in order to experience something else.

And while we may get a feeling of control in the short term, the needs themselves may not be met in any sustained way or may even increase. For example, substance use may increase feelings of anxiety or depression, inflame tensions, or decrease energy for more fulfilling experiences.

- When you think about not having that drink or using, what are you worried you will experience? What are you concerned you will miss out on?
- When you imagine having a drink or using, what are you hoping you will experience? What are you wanting to avoid?
- Does using meet those needs? What actually happens when you use or the day after?

What are your concerns about your use?

We are motivated by different things, often connected to our core values and beliefs. What concerns you about your current increased use? For example:

- **Health:** Less effective immune system and overall health, more risk of other health problems
- **Work:** Less effective or productive, more risk of mistakes or difficulty achieving tasks
- **Relationships:** Less connected or present for loved ones, more tension or misunderstandings
- **Habits:** Less in control, more drug tolerance and harder to shift increased use later on
- **Adaptation:** Less focused or creative, more stuck or overwhelmed by change
- **Values:** Less true to core values, more regret or guilt over choices.



Where do you want to be?

When you look back on this time, what choices would you feel good about making? What would you hope you had done? What would the future you want you to do?

Where does substance use fit in? When you sit back and evaluate your use – again with no judgement – what would you prefer your level of use to be? Be specific. The clearer you are now, the easier it will be to track your progress. For example:

- **How often?** Daily? Weekly? Never? A basic minimum is at least two days off a week, and a good aim is to have at least three days off in a row each week to give your body a break.
- **How much?** What is sustainable for your body, responsibilities and budget? What limits will you set on typical use and absolute maximum use? How will you realistically measure your use?
- **In what situations?** What activities do you want to keep separate from your use? What circumstances would be acceptable?

Why does this change matter to you?

It's easier to succeed if you are clear on your why. Why is reducing your alcohol or other drug use important? What bigger goal would the change help you to achieve? What's the best reason to make this change that you just can't argue with, no matter which way you look at it? Write it down.

What core values are most connected to making this change? What do you believe in that makes this the right next step for you? For some it might be about love, connection, being present. For others it's about authenticity, honesty, doing what you believe in. It may be about being a role model and leading by example. Or about energy, creativity or resilience. Logic, knowledge, professionalism. Whatever it is, it's something that ignites you and gets you fired up in all the right ways.

What might help?

Everyone's blueprint for change is a little different. Some prefer to ease in, others jump in boots and all. For some it's a very personal, even private experience, while others will want to reach out to others. Some will start small and build up. Others might start big and scale back. Some might cut down, others will cut out. What matters is your approach feels right and worth trying. For example:

- **Be clear:** Remind yourself why this is important to you. It's not competing with your other priorities, it's one of your priorities. Tell someone supportive your intention if it helps.
- **Be realistic:** What do you know about yourself that you need to take into account? What have you learned about how best to develop new habits for yourself?
- **Be smart:** Use experience from past change to give yourself the best chance of success. What works for you? What doesn't?
- **Be prepared:** What do you need to remove from the house to make this easier? What do you need to have available?
- **Be honest:** Don't kid yourself you're doing better than you are or that there was an exception that doesn't really count. Be where you are while also knowing where you want to go.
- **Be kind:** If there's setbacks, there's setbacks. Change is messy. You're doing something positive so don't be hard on yourself. Just keep trying.

Remember you're not aiming for quick change, you're aiming for lasting change. Good luck!

