

# What is substance misuse?



Substance misuse happens when alcohol, drugs, or other substances start to impact your wellbeing, relationships, or daily life. While some people use substances occasionally, their effects can be different for everyone.

What feels manageable for one person might become overwhelming for another, and that's okay. Substance misuse can take a toll on both your mind and body, but support is available, and change is possible.

**While not everyone who misuses substances develops an addiction, it can be helpful to understand the cycle of addiction, which is a pattern that can make it hard to stop using.**

## Signs & effects

Substance misuse can look different for everyone, but some common experiences include:



### Feeling strong cravings or urges

Wanting to use a substance, even when you're not planning to.



### Needing more over time

Using larger amounts to try and feel the same effects.



### Taking more risks than usual

Using substances in unsafe situations, like driving or sharing needles.



### Feeling guilty or ashamed

Worrying about how much you're using or the impact it's having.



### Finding it hard to cut back

Struggling to stop or reduce use, even if you want to.



### Feeling unwell when you stop

Headaches, shakiness, nausea, or feeling irritable when you're not using the substance.

Wherever you are, help is at your fingertips with the **Support Toolkit**

➤ [lifeline.org.au/toolkit](https://lifeline.org.au/toolkit)

# Causes

Substance misuse can develop from a mix of experiences and factors, such as:

## Coping with emotional pain

Using substances to numb or escape feelings that feel too big to handle.

## Being around substance use

Feeling pressure to join in or being in environments where substance use is common.

## Going through trauma or stress

Difficult experiences like grief, abuse, or ongoing pressure can make substance use feel like a way to cope.

## Feeling weighed down by life pressures

Stress from work, study, relationships, or money worries can all play a part.

## Managing mental health challenges

Turning to substances to cope with feelings of anxiety, sadness, or feeling overwhelmed.

## Family history or genetics

Having family members who have experienced substance use challenges can sometimes increase risk.

Experiencing substance misuse is never your fault. Whatever the cause, there are ways to navigate what you're feeling. And remember, support is available every step of the way.

# Recognising triggers & urges

Having a plan like below can help you prepare for situations that might trigger an urge to use substances. This can make it easier to spot what's happening and respond in ways that support your wellbeing.

## Substance misuse management plan

**Anticipate** What might lead to the urge to use substances?  
e.g., stressful situations, overwhelming emotions, conflict

**Identify** How might I feel or respond?  
e.g., racing thoughts, physical tension, dissociation, or seeking isolation

**Manage** What can I do instead?  
e.g., use grounding techniques, talk to someone I trust, or use a recovery app



# Practical management strategies



## Notice your triggers

Pay attention to the people, places, or feelings that make you want to use substances. Knowing what sets you off can help you plan ahead.



## Take care of your body and mind

Eating regular meals, getting enough rest, and practising ways to relax can support your wellbeing and make cravings easier to manage.



## Find healthier ways to cope

Try activities that help you feel good or ease stress, like exercising, drawing, cooking, or spending time with people who make you feel safe.



## Try helpful tools

Recovery apps can guide you through practical strategies, offer encouragement, and help you set small, achievable goals.



## Pause and distract

When cravings show up, try setting a timer for 10 minutes and doing something else, like going for a walk, listening to music, or calling someone you trust.



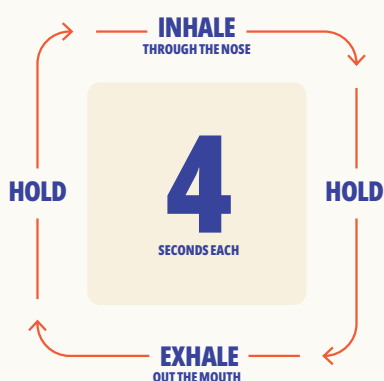
## Reach out for support

Talking openly with someone you trust can help lighten the load and remind you that you're not alone.

## Want to try something now?

If you're feeling overwhelmed or unsure where to start, a grounding technique like **box breathing**, **reciting something in order**, or **using your five senses** can help ease distress and shift your focus from the urge to use substances.

### BOX BREATHING



### RECITING TECHNIQUE

You can try reciting:

- the alphabet
- the months, backwards
- what you did yesterday



### 5 SENSES TECHNIQUE

Look for...

- 5 things you can **see**
- 4 things you can **feel**
- 3 things you can **hear**
- 2 things you can **smell**
- 1 things you can **taste**



Everyone is different, so what works for someone else might not work for you, and that's okay.

The key is to keep experimenting until you find what helps you most.

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# When to seek help

You may want to speak to a health professional if:

- ✓ You've tried to stop or cut back but find it hard to manage on your own.
- ✓ Substance use is affecting your relationships, health, or daily responsibilities.
- ✓ You're feeling unwell or experiencing withdrawal symptoms when you're not using.
- ✓ You're feeling overwhelmed, hopeless, or unsure where to start.
- ✓ You're using substances to cope with stress, trauma, or difficult emotions.
- ✓ You're taking risks or putting yourself in unsafe situations while under the influence.

## Reaching out can feel difficult, but it's a sign of strength.

Support is always available to help you feel more in control and hopeful for the future.

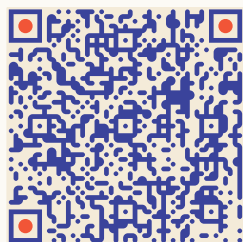
# Support is available

Understanding and managing substance misuse isn't something you have to do on your own.

Head to our **Support Toolkit** to find more practical strategies and discover national and local support services that can help.

The Support Toolkit also offers information on a wide range of mental health and wellbeing topics you can explore at your own pace, whenever you need.

Visit [lifeline.org.au/substance-misuse/services](https://lifeline.org.au/substance-misuse/services) or scan the QR code to get started.



**If you're feeling overwhelmed right now, Lifeline is here to support you.**

You can reach us 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

☎ Call 13 11 14

✉ Text 0477 131 114

💬 Chat online at [lifeline.org.au/crisis-chat](https://lifeline.org.au/crisis-chat)

**If your life is in danger, please call 000.**

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