The misuse of alcohol and other drugs can have a damaging effect on the brain. It is important to get support if you need help to manage a substance use issue.

What is substance misuse?
Substance misuse is the inappropriate or excessive use of substances — alcohol and other drugs. This includes the misuse of illegal substances, such as cannabis, ice and amphetamines, and legal substances, such as alcohol, prescription medications, and nicotine.

Substances affect how the brain works and substance misuse can have damaging and lasting effects. All drugs that are taken in excess directly activate the brain reward system, which is involved in the reinforcement of behaviours and memory production. Normal activities may be neglected as drug use serves to activate the pleasure system instead of pleasure being derived from participation in previously enjoyed activities.

Some substances are highly addictive eliciting a physical and psychological dependence on the substance following regular continued use. People with lower levels of self-control, or an impairment of the brain inhibitory mechanisms, are more likely to develop a substance use disorder.

Types of substances
There are three main types of substances or drugs: depressants, stimulants and hallucinogens.

Depressants
Depressants slow down messages to and from the brain. Types of depressants include: alcohol, cannabis (marijuana), heroin or morphine (opiates), sedatives such as Valium, some inhalants and solvents such as glue and petrol, and tranquillisers (Benzodiazepines).

Stimulants
Stimulants speed up the messages going to and from the brain. Types of stimulants include: amphetamines (speed and ice), caffeine, cocaine, ecstasy, and nicotine (tobacco).

Hallucinogens
Hallucinogens change your perception of reality. Types of hallucinogens include: GHB, LSD (acid), and MDMA.

There are also synthetic drugs that mimic the effects of the drug they are copying. The misuse of one substance or the combined use of substances can put you at risk or harm to yourself and others. You may become paranoid or anxious and in some cases psychotic, where you lose your sense of reality. You may do dangerous things which can lead to serious harm or injury.

Alcohol
Alcohol is generally considered to be a socially accepted drug in Australia. However, the abuse of alcohol poses serious health risks and can impair brain development.

It is important for young people to learn to use alcohol responsibly as irresponsible use of alcohol can lead to: binge drinking, drink driving, unsafe sex, injury or death through accidental drowning, self-harm or suicide.

Drinking large amounts of alcohol or binge drinking can cause headaches, nausea and vomiting, shakiness and hangovers. Alcohol is a neurotoxin, which means it can poison the brain. Alcohol impairs a person's judgement and puts them at risk of engaging in unsafe behaviours.

Drinking alcohol can affect how the brain develops in people under the age of 25 and young people under the age of 15 are most at risk. The areas of the brain that are affected include the frontal lobe and hippocampus. These parts of the brain are involved in motivation, impulse control and addiction. Long-term misuse of alcohol can lead to Alcohol Related Brain Injury (ARBI).

Call Lifeline on 13 11 14 if you need to talk
Why do people misuse alcohol and other drugs?

People use alcohol and other drugs for a number of reasons. Some of the reasons include to relax, have fun, dull emotional or physical pain, or to escape from problems or difficulties experienced in life. The misuse of substances can lead to a dependence on the substance to cope in certain situations and may prevent you from learning to use healthy effective coping strategies. The use of substances to escape emotional pain or to avoid dealing with issues may be effective in the short-term however the long-term impact on your health and wellbeing has serious consequences.

Signs of substance misuse or addiction:

- **neglecting responsibilities** and becoming disengaged from activities you previously enjoyed, including work, family, hobbies, sport and spending time with friends
- **participating in dangerous or risky behaviours** — drink driving, unprotected sex, using dirty needles
- **criminal behaviour** — stealing, purchase and use of illegal substances, causing physical harm to self or others
- **relationship problems** — difficulty maintaining relationships, conflict with partner, family or friends, loss of friendships, family or relationship breakdown
- **physical symptoms** — developing a tolerance to the substance and increased usage to experience the same effects; withdrawal symptoms when not using the substance
- **mental illness** — substance use may cause a person to experience symptoms of depression, anxiety, paranoia or psychosis and may trigger an underlying mental disorder
- **inability to control use of the substance** — being unable reduce or stop using the substance
- **substance use has significantly taken over your life** and impaired your ability to function.

Risks of misusing alcohol and other drugs:
The use of some drugs such as prescription medication, alcohol and tobacco is commonly accepted in our society however the misuse of these substances can have devastating effects. Legal and illegal drugs such as cannabis, ice and cocaine can be misused leading to accidental overdose or death. Misuse of alcohol and other drugs may be to manage pain or to avoid dealing with issues may be effective in the short-term however the long-term impact on your health and wellbeing has serious consequences.

What if the person doesn't want help?

Although using drugs and alcohol is a behaviour, alcohol/drug misuse is an illness, and someone with a substance use disorder cannot easily stop. Sometimes, they may try to stop but then return to their old habits. This can be very frustrating for family and friends. The following are some tips:

- **Give the person information** such as websites, so that they can read about the dangers of alcohol and drug use in their own time. They can also take an online alcohol/drug usage ‘test’.
- **Let them know that you care** for them, and are concerned about their wellbeing.
- **Set boundaries** for inappropriate behaviour, e.g. aggression, alcohol/drug use in the home.
- **Avoid nagging** them to get help.
- **Ensure they know where to get help** should they want to talk about their alcohol/drug use.
- **See someone yourself** e.g. GP, counsellor, psychologist. They can give you tips on how best to support the person, and how to look after yourself.

Where to go to for support?

Seeking help is a positive step to taking back control of your life and there are numerous support options available to you. It might be helpful to visit your GP to discuss your current situation. Your GP can refer you to local health professionals based on your needs or visit the Lifeline Service Seeker Directory at lifeline.serviceseeker.com.au to search for local services and centres in your area.

Below are some of the places to go for information and support:

- **Contact Lifeline**: 13 11 14 (available 24/7) or Online Crisis Support Chat (available nightly at www.lifeline.org.au)
- **National Cannabis Information and Helpline**
  1800 30 40 50 (11am—7pm Mon to Fri) or visit www.ncpic.org.au
- **Alcoholics Anonymous Australia**
  1300 652 820 or visit www.aa.org.au
- **Narcotics Anonymous Australia**
  1300 222 222 or visit www.na.org.au
- **Quitline**: 13 78 48 or visit www.quitnow.gov.au
- **Mensline Australia**: 1300 78 99 78 (24hrs)
- **Kids Helpline**: 1800 55 1800
- **eheadspace** (Age 12–25): www.eheadspace.org.au

It is important to identify when your use of alcohol or other drugs becomes a problem and seek help.