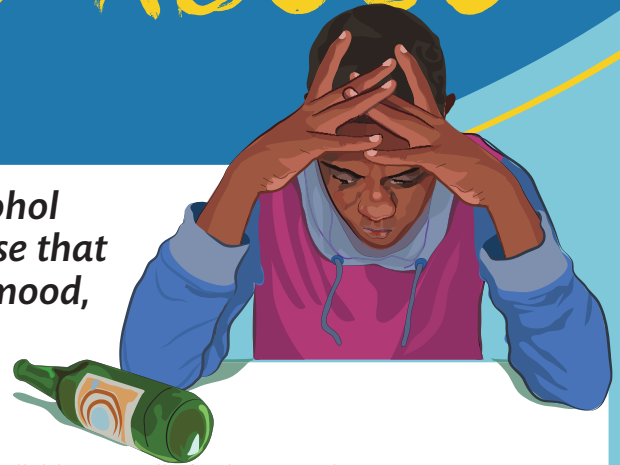


SUBSTANCE ABUSE

What is it?

Substance use is the term used for taking alcohol or drugs, those prescribed by doctors and those that are not, for purposes such as changing your mood, increasing energy or alertness, relaxation or managing pain.

- Where substance use creates problems or increases risk to you or others, or your use increases, becomes unmanageable or uncontrollable, it is called substance abuse.
- Substances commonly abused include: alcohol (beer, kachasu); marijuana (mbanje, dagga); cough medicine (bronco, lean); ARVs (efavirenz) when not prescribed; glue; painkillers etc.



Why do people use substances?

- Trying to relieve stress/cope with difficult feelings or situations
- Wanting to forget troubles, fears, worries
- To deal with fears about COVID-19 and stress from related restrictions and changes in daily life
- To escape, relax, feel happy or have fun
- Wanting to fit in with peers
- To rebel
- To experiment
- Unemployment, not much to do
- Thinking that using substances makes them more effective or efficient

How do I know if it's a problem?

It is a problem if:

- You are using substances that are creating increased health risks to you or others, your use puts you or others in increased danger, or changes the decisions you make.
- You are a younger adolescent, even occasional or casual use can be dangerous it can affect brain development, increase your risk of making poor choices, including forgetting or choosing to not take your ARVs when and how you should.
- Your use is "unmanageable".

Unmanageable is when:

- You use substances in large volumes and/or frequently
- You are using substances to block out thoughts and feelings about your life circumstances.
- Getting high seems like the only way you can feel good or deal with problems.
- You can't feel comfortable or enjoy socializing if you aren't using substances.
- You want to stop using the substance or to cut down but you have been unable to.
- It takes a long time to recover from the effects of the substance.
- You have cravings to use the substance and you feel you can't manage without it.
- Using substances is having an impact on relationships, home life, school or work.

- You stop taking your ARVs when you should, or stop all together.
- You are neglecting daily activities such as washing, studying, eating.

I feel better, less stressed and happier when I use drugs or alcohol, so why shouldn't I?

There are many beliefs about heavy use of substances that are not true, such as that they relieve stress; they cure feelings of depression and anxiety; they increase physical and mental vigour; they don't interfere with adherence.

It is important that you understand the risks and potential problems caused by substance use.

- The adolescent brain is rapidly developing up until age 25. Drugs and alcohol interfere with brain development.
- Drugs and alcohol negatively affect decision making, choices, concentration, and memory.
- Regular or heavy use:
 - makes a person MORE sensitive to everyday stress.
 - **INCREASES** the likelihood of developing mental health problems.
 - interferes with developing more effective strategies to cope with stress.
- Teenagers who binge drink are more likely to attempt suicide.
- Teenagers who binge drink are 3 times more likely to be forced into having sex than those who don't drink.
- Marijuana may decrease the level of some classes of ARVs in the blood.

What can I do about it?

- The first thing is to learn about substance abuse, to understand the risks and problems it can cause.
- Find at least 1 person who understands the problems with substance abuse that you trust and can confide in. Ask this person if they will be your 'buddy' to support you in stopping using drugs or alcohol. Remember during COVID-19 you might need to use the internet, phone or chat to your buddy.
- With the support of this person/people figure out the specific stressors you experience that lead you to abuse substances. Make a list.
 - What do you worry about?
 - What in your life is making you unhappy?
 - What are the things that make you feel stressed?
- For each thing you listed, brainstorm what you can do when you feel these things/have these thoughts instead of taking drugs or drinking. Include things you can do alone and things that involve others.
- Ask your friends to help you stay away from taking drugs and alcohol.
- Make the agreement with your 'buddy' that you'll tell him/her if you lapse and do use alcohol or drugs. Don't lie about it or be secretive.
- If you lapse, start over. Sometimes it takes practice.
- Review your coping list to see if there's anything you want to add or change.
- Seek professional help from a doctor, psychiatrist or psychologist as in some cases it can be dangerous to try and stop taking drugs without assistance. During COVID-19 it may be harder to see someone face to face but you can still get support online or over the phone.

