Positive Choices
Drug and Alcohol Information
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Transitioning from high school to tertiary education and what it can mean for mental health

The transition from high school to tertiary education

For many young people, finishing high school and transitioning into tertiary education can be an exciting and rewarding time. Whilst this time can come with many new experiences it can also introduce new stressors. This stage of life often involves increased independence and socialising as young people form new friendships, move out of home, and are responsible for their own learning and education.

Understanding the Mental Health Landscape

Research has shown that the transition from high school to tertiary education (e.g., University, TAFE, or other vocational training) is linked to anxiety and stress for some young people. This can be due to more demanding academic requirements of tertiary education and the added pressures of work and extracurricular activities.

Psychological factors may also play an important role in determining how young people respond to the transition from high school.Young people who report lower self-efficacy (belief in their ability to succeed), lower levels of optimism (expecting positive outcomes), or worse mental health, such as depression or anxiety, may face increased levels of stress and difficulty with this transition..

Some individuals may be more affected by mental health concerns after the transition to tertiary education, including:

- Australian students in rural areas
- Young people from culturally diverse backgrounds
- LGBTQI+ youth
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth
- Students with different linguistic backgrounds

Additionally, international or exchange students are more likely to feel more anxiety and stress from academic demands and cultural adjustments, compared to local students. They are also less likely to seek help for mental health related problems. The leap from high school to tertiary education can either worsen existing mental health issues or give rise to new ones.

The Crucial Role of Social Networks

One of the biggest challenges faced during this life stage is saying farewell to familiar faces and making new connections. The loss of school friends paired with the pressure to form new relationships can be anxiety-provoking for some. For individuals from culturally diverse backgrounds or those going into higher education as first-generation students, the risk of social isolation is particularly high. Helping young people form supportive peer networks is an important part of supporting the transition out of high school.

The Intersection of Anxiety and Alcohol Use

At this new stage of life there are the changes in socialising which can increasingly involve alcohol use and harmful drinking behaviours.Studies have shown that people with higher levels of anxiety may be more likely to engage in harmful drinking behaviours as a way of coping. This is linked to higher drop-out rates, poorer mental health, and risks to physical safety such as increased risky sexual activity and suicidal ideation.

Among Australian university students with an anxiety disorder, a large portion drink alcohol at concerning levels.It's estimated that 25% of those with anxiety drink at hazardous or harmful levels, with a further 29% drinking at levels which put them at risk of alcohol dependence (see glossary). Men, 18- to 20-year-olds, current smokers, and Australian-born students **are all at a greater risk of engaging in harmful drinking behaviours**.

The Inroads anxiety and alcohol program

The online-based Inroads program was developed (funded by Australian Rotary Health) to support young adults in managing their anxiety, stress, and alcohol consumption.

The Inroads program has been specifically designed for young people who want to learn skills to manage their anxiety and/or stress and take control of their drinking. The program includes five online, self-guided modules. The modules include cognitive behavioural therapy skills, real-life examples of how people have overcome their own anxiety and alcohol concerns, and interactive features. The real-life examples include descriptions of how young people took control of their anxiety and alcohol use across the transition from high school to beginning tertiary education.

Registrations for the *Inroads* program are currently closed. For more information or to register to be notified when the program becomes available, visitinroads.org.au/register.

How can parents and school staff support a smooth transition?

Here are some recommendations to help teenagers prepare for the transition out of high school, better cope with anxiety and stress, and navigate their relationship with alcohol.

1. Help develop their independence, so they can manage stress-inducing tasks. Teaching life skills like budgeting, safety, and housework in advance can help lower stress.

2. Help them develop **other anxiety coping strategies** (see Beyondblue's anxiety and management strategies). Talk about alternate activities to help them unwind or manage stress (e.g., podcasts, meditating, playing sport).

3. Help them **set achievable and realistic goals**, by breaking goals down into smaller, more manageable steps.

4. Support them to figure out **a time-management system** that works well for them. Help them find ways to schedule and balance activities they want to prioritise (e.g., studying, working, socialising).

5. Help them **set their own drinking limits.** Encourage them to consider strategies that might help them stick to these limits. Examples include:
   i. Swapping to non-alcoholic drinks
   ii. Limiting the amount of money they have available to spend
   iii. Avoiding people, places, activities or times that tend to lead to risky drinking

6. Discuss other factors that may contribute to alcohol related harms, such as their own mental state or the different settings they may drink in. See our factsheet onHarm reduction: Set, Setting, Drug to learn more.

7. Help build their confidence and ability to refuse alcohol and **be assertive about their drinking limits.** It can help to practice different ways to firmly say no. See our Positive Choices factsheet or this video for inspiration.

For more resources, **Reach Out** offers helpful support to guide parents through this transition.

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