Positive Choices
Drug and Alcohol Information
Get informed, stay smart, stay safe

Factsheet

Mental health and alcohol/drug use during difficult times



Evidence ratings:

This resource has undergone expert review. See our Help/Q&A section for more details.

Year: Year 7–8, Year 9–10, Year 11–12

Targeted Drugs: Alcohol, Cannabis, Drugs (General)

Tags: mental health

Origin: Australian

Cost:
Free

Introduction

During stressful times everyone copes differently. There are many things that can cause stress, including natural disasters, the COVID-19 pandemic, or school exams. For some people, certain times of year are more stressful, such as the summer holidays. If you are feeling sad, worried, or uncertain, it is important to talk about it and reach out for support.

Getting support

Many people feel stressed, worried, panicky, hopeless, or distressed at some point in their lives. It is important that you know there is effective support available to help you through difficult times. No one needs to face their problems alone.

It is important to talk to a trusted adult, friend or family member about the things that are worrying you. It might help to speak with a professional, like a school counsellor, GP (doctor) or psychologist. This video by Reach Out talks about what to expect when seeing a psychologist.

Other places you can go to for help include:

- Kids Helpline
  www.kidshelpline.com.au
  Phone: 1800 55 1800
- ReachOut
  http://au.reachout.com/
- Headspace
  http://www.headspace.org.au/
- National Alcohol and Other Drug Hotline
  Phone: 1800 250 015
- 13YARN
  https://www.13yarn.org.au/
  Phone: 13 92 76
- QLife
  https://qlife.org.au/
  Phone: 1800 184 527

You can find a full list on where to get help on this page.

Looking after your mental health

It is important that we actively look after our mental health, particularly during times of increased difficulty or stress. There are several practical strategies you can use in your everyday life to keep on top of your mental health. The strategies listed below are effective for promoting wellbeing and mental health, and are based on cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) strategies that focus on the way we think (i.e. cognition) and what we do (i.e. behaviour).

Click the headings below for tips on looking after your mental health.

Get a good night's sleep



- Aim for 8-10 hours of sleep every night. Sleep can be affected during times of stress. Getting the recommended amount of sleep has been associated with improved mood and better academic performance. To help you get to sleep and stay asleep, follow good sleep hygiene practices. These include limiting screen time and caffeine before bed, ensuring your bedroom is quiet, dark and a comfortable temperature, and doing moderate exercise such as walking or swimming late in the afternoon.
- If you struggle to fall asleep, try relaxing your muscle groups one at a time and focus on taking slow deep breaths. Click here for access to free guided relaxation exercises provided by Beyond Blue.
- Waking up at a similar time each day helps you sleep better at night.
- Getting enough sleep supports your wellbeing because it can help improve your energy levels, concentration, academic performance, and mood.

Schedule time with family and friends



- It's important to socially connect with family and friends. Even connecting online or over the phone can boost your mood and help overcome feelings of loneliness.

Take a break and schedule some fun



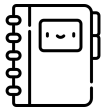
- Sometimes the news, school, or other life events can feel overwhelming. Similarly, the holidays can be a fun time but can also be stressful.
- Make an effort to schedule something that you will find fun every day. It can be something simple, like listening to a song that makes you feel like dancing or playing a game with a friend.
- Deliberately doing something fun (even when you are not in the mood for it) has proven long-term benefits for your mental wellbeing.

Move your body



- Getting active and exercising is great for your body as well as your mind. Exercise can improve your mood and helps lower stress and symptoms of anxiety.
- Find a type of physical activity you enjoy doing such as swimming, yoga, or a team sport. Remember - with any physical activity, being consistent is important in order to see the positive effects.

Keep a thoughts and feelings diary



- The way we think about events affects the way we feel. During tough times, our thinking can become focussed on imagining all the potential worst-case scenarios. Thinking like this can leave us feeling overwhelmed and scared.
- Writing down what you are worried or sad about can help clear your head. Seeing your thoughts on paper can also help you identify whether your thoughts are overly negative or focussed on unlikely, worst-case scenarios. If you see that your thoughts have a negative focus, try re-phrasing them to take a more balanced or realistic view of the situation.

Talk it through



- It can really help to talk through your concerns or worries with a trusted friend or family member to help you gain a different perspective. Choose someone who is calm and supportive.
- If you find you are struggling with negative thoughts or worries, reach out for support. Effective help is available and can make a big difference.

Avoid using drugs and alcohol



- Alcohol and other drugs can have a negative impact on your mental health. In view of the mental and physical health consequences, the Australian National Health and Medical Research Council recommends that *"young people under 18 years of age should not drink alcohol."*.
- In line with this recommendation, more and more young Australians are choosing not to drink alcohol or use other drugs compared to in previous years. The majority of secondary school students don't drink alcohol (78%), don't smoke (87%), and have never tried cannabis (87%) or other drugs (94%).

Further information and resources

For more information about how to apply these and other strategies to support your emotional wellbeing during times of stress and uncertainty, check out these guided workbooks, factsheets, and courses:

Guided workbooks and Factsheets:

- This Way Up: Coping Guides
- ReachOut: How to deal with uncertainty

Courses:

- The BRAVE Program
- This Way Up: Teen Worry and Sadness Program

Alcohol and other drug use during stressful times

For some people, using alcohol or other drugs may be a response to the worries and stress experienced during tough times. This can end up making people feel worse. Apart from the unpleasant physical effects, like a hangover, using alcohol and drugs can lead to bigger problems with your health, family, friends, study, and work. Using alcohol and drugs as a coping strategy also prevents people from learning other ways to manage low mood or anxiety. There is also a risk of becoming dependent on (i.e., addicted to) alcohol or other drugs.

Using alcohol and other drugs can affect the way your brain develops and contribute to the development of mental health disorders including depression and anxiety. Many symptoms of depression and anxiety become worse when alcohol or other drugs are used. Alcohol and other drugs can negatively affect:






- Mood e.g. low mood and loss of interest in previously enjoyed activities.
- Sleep e.g. difficulty falling asleep, staying asleep, and increased daytime sleepiness.
- Concentration e.g. shorter attention span and poorer memory.
- Energy levels e.g. lethargy and low energy.

To learn more about the impact of alcohol, cannabis, vaping, and MDMA use on the teenage brain check outthese videos.

Signs that a person may benefit from professional support

Some of the warning signs that a person may need professional support for an alcohol or other drug problem include:

- Using more or seeming less affected by the same amount of the alcohol/drug.
- Finding it difficult to use less or go without the alcohol/drug.
- Fights or relationship problems with friends or family due to alcohol/drug use.
- Feeling worried about alcohol/drug use or its impact on you.
- Family or friends are concerned about alcohol/drug use.

Evidence Base

This factsheet was developed following expert review by researchers at the Matilda Centre for Research in Mental Health and Substance Use at the University of Sydney. A full list of sources which informed this factsheet can be seen below.

Sources

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