



THE GETTING SORTED GUIDE TO ALCOHOL AND DRUGS

**This guide was written by people with lived experience of mental distress.
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About This Guide

People use alcohol and recreational drugs for lots of reasons – to have fun, to self-medicate when life feels bad or to have new experiences. Alcohol and drugs can also do great harm to some people and they drive up rates of violence, crime, mental distress, relationship breakdowns and days off work. All of us need to get sorted with drugs and alcohol. For some of us that means learning to use them in ways that don't do harm. For others it means not using them at all.

This guide will suggest ways you can get sorted with recreational drugs. We do not include information about tobacco in this guide.

A note about language: we use 'recreational drugs' to mean both alcohol and drugs and 'mental distress' as a non-medical alternative to 'mental illness'.

“I drank in order to suppress the negative feelings of mania and depression. The more I drank the sicker I became, yet I would not address my alcohol problem because alcohol had become my best friend.”

Uppers, Downers and Benders

Some recreational drugs are legal, like alcohol and some party pills and synthetic cannabis. Others are illegal, like marijuana, ecstasy, cocaine and heroin. Some are prescription drugs that are used for recreation rather than treatment.

Recreational drugs come in three main types:

Stimulants

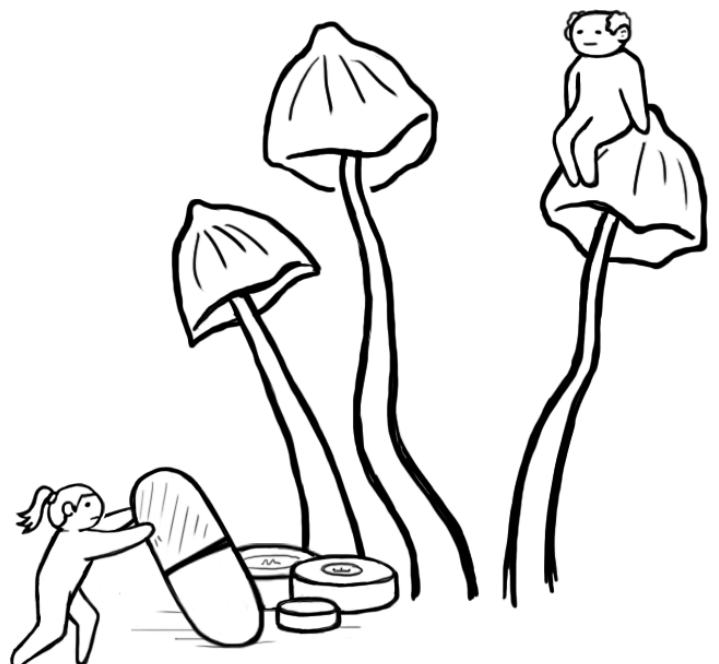
Stimulants make people feel more alert, energetic and full of wellbeing; they give a rush of adrenalin which is often followed by a crash. People who use them for a long time often get irritable, paranoid, restless and depressed. Coffee is the most widely used and least harmful stimulant. Others include cocaine (coke), crack cocaine, amphetamines (speed or base) and methamphetamines (ice).

Depressants

Depressants sedate or slow people down. They reduce pain, anxiety and fear and put people at ease. These drugs can be highly addictive. Alcohol is the most commonly used depressant even though people may initially feel more energetic when drinking. Other depressants include marijuana (also an hallucinogen), synthetic cannabis and heroin. Some prescription depressants used recreationally are barbiturates, benzodiazepines, ketamine, morphine and codeine.

Hallucinogens

Hallucinogens change a person's perception of reality. They may experience illusions, out of body experiences, rapidly changing emotions and sometimes completely altered realities. Sometimes people have 'good trips' where they feel wonder and wellbeing but sometimes they have 'bad trips' where they experience anxiety, a panic attack or psychosis. Hallucinogenic drugs include LSD, magic mushrooms, datura, cactus, cannabis, nitrous oxide and ecstasy (also a stimulant).



“For me, alcoholism was merely a shield for my bigger problems: my mental illness. Getting treated just for alcoholism was not enough for me. I had to dig deep into myself, become vulnerable, and start to become self-aware.”

My Beliefs About Recreational Drugs

Most of us pick up a mix of positive and negative beliefs about alcohol and drugs from our friends, family, community and the media. These beliefs drive us to either use, misuse, or abstain from recreational drugs.

Write down the positive and negative beliefs you have come across about alcohol and drugs. Then tick the beliefs you agree with and put a cross beside the ones you disagree with.

Positive beliefs (Examples: they make people feel relaxed or confident)

✓ or x

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Negative beliefs (Examples: they cause anti-social behaviour or addiction)

✓ or x

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How do you think your beliefs influence your use of alcohol and drugs?

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Recreational Drugs and Mental Distress

People who experience severe mental distress have to be even more careful about the way they use drugs and alcohol than people who don't experience it.

Alcohol and drugs use can increase people's risk of developing mental distress in the first place. For instance, cannabis and LSD can trigger psychosis in some people.

People with mental distress often use alcohol and drugs to self-medicate their distress or to relieve the side-effects of medication. However, in the long-run drugs and alcohol may worsen the feelings they initially relieved or they may trigger new forms of distress.

Recreational drugs may also interact in unhelpful ways with some psychiatric medications by making people more intoxicated or by reducing their effectiveness.

Think about how your mental distress and recreational drug use might be interacting with each other.

Has my mental distress affected my use of alcohol and drugs and how?

Has my use of alcohol and drugs affected my mental distress and how?

“It helps to have a psychiatrist tell you that if you drink on your current medications you could go into a coma, have a seizure, and even die. Those are pretty good reasons not to have a sip of booze!”

What’s a Safe Level?

If you are experiencing mental distress and on psychiatric medication, you will need to be extra cautious about your use of recreational drugs.

Alcohol

For healthy men and women:

- ~ More than two standard drinks per day will increase your lifetime risk of alcohol related illness or injury.
- ~ More than four standard drinks on a single occasion will increase your risk of alcohol related injury arising from that occasion.

Pregnant and breastfeeding women should not drink at all.

(A standard drink isn’t much—it equals a small glass of wine, a can of beer or a single shot of spirits.)

Prescription drugs for recreational use

It is not wise to take prescription drugs that a doctor has not prescribed for you but if you do take them:

- ~ Take no more than the recommended dosage for treatment use.
- ~ Check the drug doesn’t interact badly with your prescription medication.

Illegal drugs

Because these drugs are prohibited governments do not regulate what is in them like they do with alcohol or prescription pills, so it is not possible to recommend a safe limit. The people who prepare or make these drugs are not always trustworthy, so use as little as possible until you know what you’re dealing with.

“Often I have focused on my addiction—either serving it or treating it—and ignored other issues. Or I would treat the mental illness but not the addiction. Recovery in either area for me has always remained elusive and unobtainable until I sought simultaneous help.”

Use, Misuse and Addiction

What is the difference between use and abuse of alcohol and drugs? Use implies it's not harmful whereas misuse implies that it is harmful.

Thinking about your use and other people's use of alcohol and drugs, at what point do you start to think that alcohol and drugs are doing harm?

Not all misuse of recreational drugs means you have an addiction but addiction can result from ongoing misuse. Addiction happens when we develop an uncontrollable urge to use alcohol or drugs at all costs.

There are a number of ideas about why some people become addicted to drugs and alcohol:

Physical: addiction is a disease of the brain and body.

Emotional: using is a way of coping with life's problems.

Social: it's learned behaviour in a culture that allows substance abuse.

Moral: people get addicted because they are weak willed.

What reasons do you think people develop addictions?

Note: Most people do not agree with the idea that addiction is a moral failure. An addiction does not mean a person is bad or weak willed.

Are Recreational Drugs a Problem for Me?

Look at the four Ls in your life (liver, love, labour and law) to decide whether or not your alcohol or drug use is a problem in each area. Consider the feedback you get from family and friends about your use of recreational drugs; sometimes we find it hard to acknowledge we have a problem.

Area of life	Is my use of drugs and alcohol causing harm in any of the following ways?	Yes or No
Liver (Health)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ~ Mental distress and emotional problems. ~ Physical sickness or ailments. ~ Accidents or injuries. 	
Love (Relationships)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ~ Strained or broken relationships with family, partner, children or friends. 	
Labour (Work or study)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ~ Slipping performance. ~ Turning up late or taking lots of days off. ~ Difficulty finding and keeping work. 	
Law (Crime)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ~ Traffic offenses. ~ Drug related offences. ~ Offenses for aggressive or anti-social behaviour. 	

If you answered yes to one of these areas, alcohol and drugs are causing problems in your life. If you answered yes to more than one, they are probably causing serious harm in your life.

The sooner you get your alcohol and drug use sorted the better your life will be.



“When I knew I had to quit alcohol and drugs altogether, I thought I would lose part of myself. That fun, happy go-lucky part that always knew how to be outrageous and have a good time. It was tough at first, but it was mainly about me getting my head around it, believing I could do it and that it was going to be the best for me. Now I don’t even really think about drinking, I enjoy myself socially and it’s helped keep me well and out of hospital for over two years now.”

To Cut Down or to Stop?

If drugs and alcohol are a problem in your life you will probably benefit from cutting down or stopping them altogether.

Cutting down

If you’re worried about your use of alcohol and drugs, but want to continue using them more safely, here are some ways to help you cut back:

- ~ Don’t drink or use to feel better when you’re down or anxious.
- ~ Avoid drinking or using on your own.
- ~ Avoid keeping alcohol or drugs at your house.
- ~ Avoid drinking or using during the week or have drug and alcohol-free days or weeks.
- ~ Set yourself a limit and get your friends to help you stick to it.
- ~ Leave the party or the pub early if you think you’ll drink or use too much.
- ~ Go to places or events where people don’t usually drink or use, like the movies.
- ~ Try low alcohol drinks, pour weak drinks or water down your drinks.
- ~ Alternate alcoholic drinks with non-alcoholic ones.
- ~ Keep a count of your drinks, doses or smokes and stop at a safe number.

Stopping

The more addicted a person is the more they will benefit from stopping alcohol and drugs. People with addiction usually find it really hard to stop. However, many people with addiction have succeeded in stopping their use of drugs and alcohol, even if they stop several times before they kick the habit for good.

If you want to stop, you need to have a vision for a better life than the one you are leaving behind to motivate you. You may need to change your friends and your lifestyle and get support from people who are clean.

“Some things just couldn’t be protected from storms. Some things simply needed to be broken off. Once old things were broken off amazingly beautiful thing could grow in their place.”

Taking Control of Our Alcohol and Drug Use

If you want to cut down or stop there are a number of ways you can start to take control. Have a read and see if there are any ways that you think might help you.

Substance use diary

Keeping a diary of your substance use can help you keep track of how much you’re using. Sometimes looking honestly at your drug and alcohol use can help motivate you to cut back or quit.

Life planning

Life planning is about looking at your current situation, deciding on the changes you want to make and setting goals. It can help motivate you to make changes. You can do it yourself or with a support person.

Exercise

Doing regular exercise is good for your physical and mental health. Planning exercise and following a healthier lifestyle can help defer unhealthy addiction habits.

Peer support groups

Connecting with others who know first-hand what you’re going through can help reduce feelings of isolation, fear, and hopelessness. Groups like Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous are run in most areas around the world.

Avoid tempting situations and people

Remove yourself from tempting situations and friends. Make new friends who are clean and take the time to build your resilience for stopping or using less.

Take up a new hobby

Busy yourself with something you love or something you’ve always wanted to do. Replace your old ‘hobby’ with something new and fun.

Positive self talk

Be kind and encourage yourself. Finding inner strength and being positive about yourself will help you in your journey to recovery.

Congratulate yourself

Acknowledge your achievements and pat yourself on the back when you’re doing well.

“Trying to fight cravings is like trying to block a waterfall. We end up being inundated. With mindfulness, we step aside and watch the water (cravings) just go right past.”

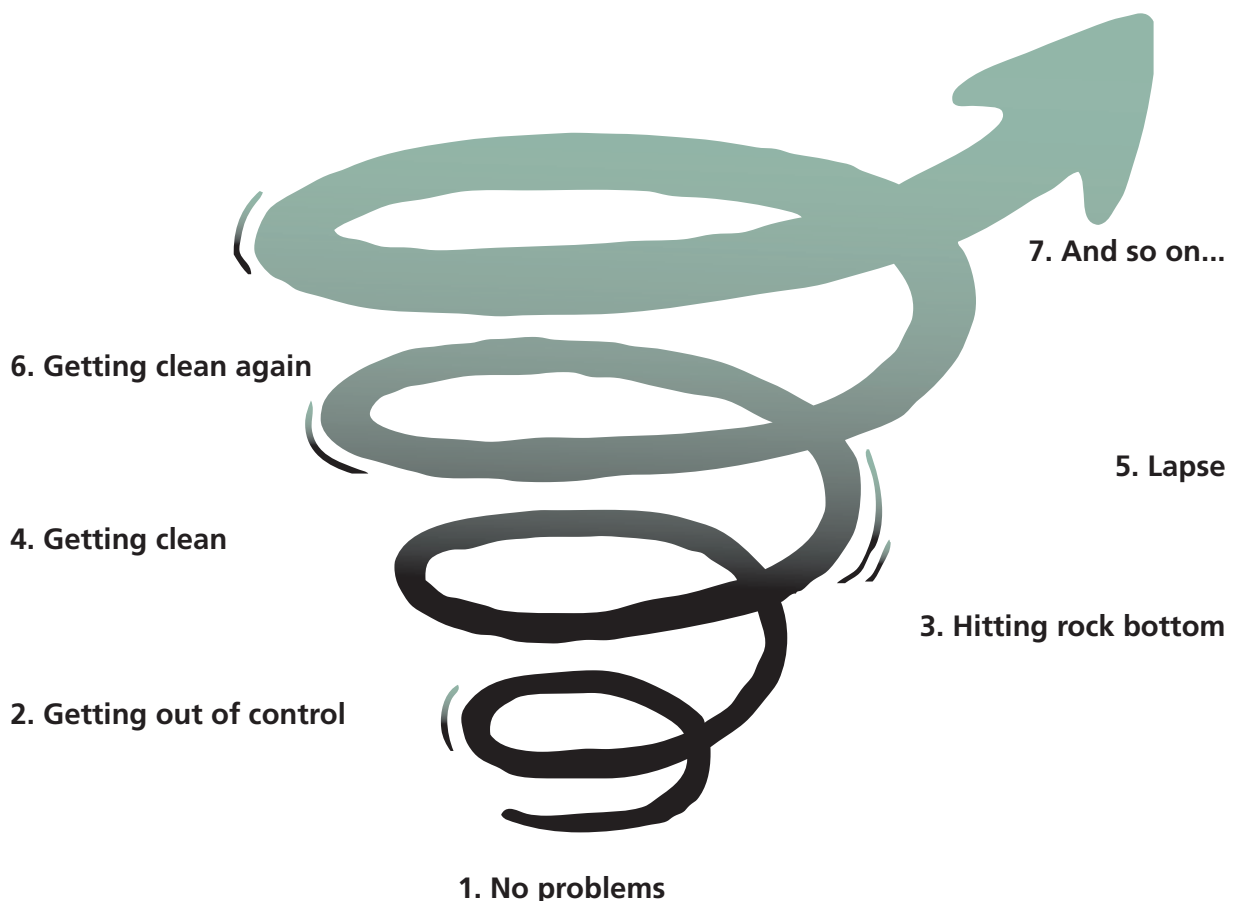
Dealing With Cravings and Lapses

Cravings and lapses are a normal part of the recovery process. It's important to remember that cravings will pass and we can always learn from lapses.

The spiral-up model

A lapse is a minor form of relapse, when we have a 'blip' in our recovery journey. If you are abstinent then have one beer, this would be called a lapse. If you keep drinking then it would be considered a relapse. Some people lapse or relapse many times in their journey of recovery. It's not about how many times we lapse, but what we learn and how it changes us that's important.

The spiral-up model acknowledges that when we stop drinking or using we may have repeated lapses but we are continually learning; there is hope we can live well for long periods or a life time. This can be a recurring process. Recovery can be happening at any point - we can still be using and be in recovery if we learn from our lapses and keep moving up the spiral.



“I had an epiphany and I could see I needed the type of help that would enable me to take responsibility for my own life. Ultimately I knew the only person who could succeed in doing that, but I needed help along the way.”

The Spiral-Up Model and Me

If alcohol and drugs have been a problem in your life, think about your own story and how it relates to the spiral up model.

Draw your version of the model or write your story here:



Urge Surfing

Urge surfing is a relapse prevention technique based on the principles of mindfulness meditation. When we pay great attention to what our craving feels like without passing any judgment about what we are feeling, we learn to ride over waves of cravings and we rob these cravings of much of their power.

Give it a go

- ~ When you feel a craving coming on, sit down in a comfortable chair and close your eyes.
- ~ Watch your breath without altering it and notice the sensations in your body.
- ~ When you have the urge to drink or use notice your thoughts and feelings, then bring your attention back to your breathing and the sensations in your body.
- ~ Your thoughts will increase and the urge will initially get stronger.
- ~ Without judging your urge, feeding it or fighting it, gently bring your attention back to your breath and the sensations in your body.
- ~ The urge will crest, then subside, then eventually go away.

To Finish

Thinking about what you have learnt in this guide and what you already know—what do you think will help you most to get sorted with recreational drugs?



General Information on Recreational Drugs

Alcohol and Drug Information Network

Alcohol and drug search directory.
<http://www.adin.com.au/>

Australian Drug Foundation

Facts and resources about alcohol and drugs.
<http://www.druginfo.adf.org.au/>

Pocket Guide to Recreational Drugs

A practical guide to the safety and health issues of recreational drug use.
http://www.hoboes.com/Politics/Prohibition/Drug_Guide/

Online Counselling and Help Lines

In an emergency
Call 000

Counselling online

Free drug and alcohol counselling
<http://www.counsellingonline.org.au/>
Call 1800 888 236 (24/7)

Cannabis Information and Helpline

Help and advice on cannabis
<http://ncpic.org.au/ncpic/helpline/>
Call 1800 30 40 50 (2pm to 11pm Sunday to Friday)

Peer Support

Alcoholics Anonymous

A twelve step fellowship for people with alcohol addiction
<http://www.aa.org.au/>
Call 1300 222 222

Narcotics Anonymous

A twelve step fellowship for people with narcotic addiction
<http://www.na.org.au/>
Call 1300 652 820

Smart Recovery

Self-management for addiction recovery
<http://www.smartrecovery.org/>

Australian Injecting and Illicit Users League

A peer-based organisation run by and for people who use or have used illicit drugs.
<http://www.aivl.org.au/>

Family Support

Al-Anon and Alateen

To help families and friends recover from living with someone whose drinking is a problem.

<http://www.al-anon.org/australia/>

Call 03 9620 2166

Family Drug Help

Support for families where there is problematic alcohol and drug use

<http://www.familydrughelp.org.au/>

Call 1300 660 068 (9am to 9pm, Monday to Friday)

Family Drug Support

Supporting families affected by alcohol and other drugs

<http://www.fds.org.au/>

Call 1300 368 186 (24/7)

Kids Help Line

Free telephone and online counselling service for young people aged between 5 and 25.

<http://www.kidshelp.com.au/>

Call 1800 55 1800 (24/7)

State and Territory Drug Information Services

Confidential 24/7 alcohol and drug counselling and referral lines

~ NSW

02 9361 8000 from Sydney

1800 422 599 from Regional NSW

~ SA

1300 131 340

~ VIC

1800 888 236

~ TAS

1800 811 994

~ QLD

1800 177 833

~ ACT

02 6207 9977

~ WA

08 9442 5000 from Pert

1800 198 024 from Regional WA

~ NT

1800 131 350

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