

STAY IN CONTROL

ALCOHOL

AND DRUGS

Some people can't start the day without a cup of coffee to wake them up and others find a glass of wine is a good way to unwind. Many people find social events less daunting after a few drinks and a bar of chocolate provides a comforting treat. The use of substances to change the way we feel is a normal part of everyday life.

Different cultures use different drugs, and rules about using alcohol and drugs have developed over time to help societies avoid their less desirable effects. Most people learn to use drugs from their friends, families, from experimentation and from making mistakes.

**IN THE UK, MOST ADULTS HAVE DRUNK ALCOHOL AND A SIZEABLE MINORITY HAVE TAKEN DRUGS AT SOME POINT IN THEIR LIVES.**

In a survey of 3,000 second year students at ten UK universities, one in five reported using cannabis at least once a week and one in three reported experience with other illicit drugs. 46 per cent of the sample had started using drugs at school\*.

\*The Lancet, (1996) Vol.348.

'...ONE IN FIVE REPORTED USING CANNABIS AT LEAST ONCE A WEEK AND ONE IN THREE REPORTED EXPERIENCE WITH OTHER ILLICIT DRUGS...'

## WHAT CAUSES PROBLEMS WITH ALCOHOL AND DRUGS?

**COMPARATIVELY FEW PEOPLE RUN INTO SERIOUS PROBLEMS WITH ALCOHOL OR DRUG MISUSE BUT IT IS OFTEN A CONTRIBUTORY FACTOR IN DEPRESSION, ACADEMIC FAILURE, RELATIONSHIP PROBLEMS, DEBT, VIOLENCE, BREAKING THE LAW, PREGNANCY, SEXUALLY TRANSMITTED DISEASES AND SUICIDE.**

### **Problems can be caused by the substance itself**

- Alcohol shuts down the central nervous system, so that as you drink, relaxation becomes disinhibition. You may become the life and soul of the party, become aggressive, put yourself at risk or have sex when you didn't intend to. You may not remember what you have done. If you continue to drink to try to maintain the feeling of intoxication, your system will continue to shut down. You may fall asleep, fall into a coma, or even stop breathing
- The effects of alcohol and drugs are unpredictable. Factors such as your size, gender, tiredness and how much you have eaten will all have an effect
- Stimulants such as amphetamines or cocaine, may make you feel confident and energised, or agitated, paranoid and aggressive
- Hallucinogens like ecstasy and LSD can be a liberating experience, or a terrifying nightmare
- Mixing substances can have a more extreme effect than you might expect
- If you are using illegal drugs, you may not know what you are actually consuming. There is no quality control and it may contain other cheaper, harmful, substances
- Alcohol and drugs can aggravate pre-existing mental or physical health conditions. Drugs have been implicated in the serious mental health problems and sudden deaths of young people.

# WHAT CAUSES PROBLEMS WITH ALCOHOL AND DRUGS?

## REGULAR DRINKING OR DRUG USE MAY CAUSE PROBLEMS

- Many people like the feeling of being intoxicated and want to feel like this a lot of the time. If you drink or use drugs on a regular basis, you may have to consume more for the same effect as your body develops a tolerance
- You may feel uncomfortable and edgy if you delay having your regular drink or drug. Drugs such as alcohol, nicotine and heroin can cause withdrawal symptoms of disturbed sleep, agitation, shaking, sweating and depression. Stimulants, such as amphetamines and ecstasy leave regular users feeling lethargic, depressed, physically drained and lacking in motivation. It may be difficult to get up for lectures or work in the morning and it is likely to affect your concentration. You may want to relieve these symptoms by further drinking or taking more drugs. 'Taking the hair of the dog that bit you' offers only temporary relief and it becomes difficult to get out of this cycle



A REGULAR DRINKING OR DRUG HABIT CAN BE VERY EXPENSIVE

## YOU DON'T HAVE TO BE AN ADDICT TO RUN INTO DIFFICULTIES. YOU MAY BE USING DRINK OR DRUGS AS A WAY OF COPING WITH OTHER ISSUES

- Perhaps you don't feel part of the social scene, so drinking or using drugs helps you fit into a group that appears a bit different or more interesting
- You might feel shy or uncomfortable with people and need a few drinks or drugs to loosen up
- Getting high or drunk might offer an escape from unhappy or difficult feelings. However, you are likely to feel even more miserable or angry in the longer term. This can be a real downer for your friends and people around you
- Taking hallucinogens, like ecstasy or skunk, when you are worried or troubled can induce paranoia or unpleasant delusions. These disturbing experiences may affect you for a long time
- Sometimes students use drugs to self-medicate when they are feeling depressed and anxious instead of asking for professional help.

**If any of the above sounds familiar, you might need to change the way you use alcohol and drugs.**



## HOW YOU CAN HELP YOURSELF

**TO AVOID ALL RISKS WITH ALCOHOL OR DRUGS, DON'T USE THEM AT ALL. OTHERWISE, BE AWARE OF WHAT YOU ARE TAKING AND BE AWARE OF THE RISKS**

- If you are going out drinking or clubbing, make sure you are amongst friends who you can trust. Try to make sure that at least one of you stays sober to keep an eye on the drinks and to make sure that everyone gets home safely
- Driving under the influence of alcohol or drugs puts you and others at risk and you could lose your licence and liberty. Get a taxi or public transport.
- Alcohol and drugs may make you sexually disinhibited. Carry condoms and practice safe sex. Better still, arrange to meet at another time when your judgement may be better
- Let your friends know what you are taking so that they can get help if you run into problems. Don't rely on security staff at clubs and pubs to help
- Keep control of what you consume. It is safer to refuse a drink or drugs from a stranger. Your drink may be spiked. Drugs may be cut with rubbish or be purer than you expect
- Using alcohol or cannabis to come down off other drugs is unpredictable and risky. If you are taking anything for medical reasons (such as anti-histamines, antidepressants, paracetamol), remember that these will also react with alcohol and other drugs
- If you are worried about something you have taken, contact your GP for advice. If you feel unwell, go to the Emergency Department at the nearest hospital.

**DON'T EVER SHARE NEEDLES**

## HOW YOU CAN HELP YOURSELF

**DRINKING OR USING DRUGS TO SELF-MEDICATE WHEN YOU ARE FEELING LOW IS LIKELY TO MAKE YOU FEEL WORSE. DO SOMETHING ELSE TO LIFT YOUR MOOD**

- If alcohol or drugs is affecting your studies, talk to your personal tutor, or someone you trust in your School. You can also contact the Counselling Service for help
- You may drink or use drugs to cope with a bad patch. It is better to get support from friends, family or the Counselling Service. It can be a relief just to tell someone else what you are going through
- Try keeping a record of what you are consuming. Ask yourself how much does it cost? Be honest with yourself about the consequences – eg hangovers, missed lectures or deadlines, fights or unwanted sexual encounters
- Set a limit on what you consume or how much you are going to spend. The recommended safe limit for women is 14 units of alcohol a week (no more than two to three units a day) and 21 units a week (no more than three to four units in a day) for men
- Have a few alcohol/drug free days each week to give your body a chance to recover. If you find this difficult, it may indicate that you have developed a problem

## HOW YOU CAN HELP YOURSELF

### REMEMBER THAT MOST 'RECREATIONAL' DRUG USE IS ILLEGAL.

If you are stopped by the police, you may be prosecuted for possession or for dealing. This can have effect on your future, particularly if you want a career in medicine, nursing, or the law

- Possessing illegal drugs in your accommodation may have consequences for your flatmates and could get you evicted or prosecuted
- There are many people in the University to whom you can turn for support. Initially, you may prefer to speak to someone you know, such as your personal or senior tutor, or a member of staff in your School. They will put you in touch with specialist services, if necessary. You may prefer to approach the Counselling Service, the Student Health Service, or the Students' Union
- If your difficulties are affecting your academic work, talk to your personal tutor or a member of staff in your School so that they can help you with arrangements for course work or exams
- There are specialist organisations providing advice, information and support and you can find their details at [westminster.ac.uk/counselling](http://westminster.ac.uk/counselling)

## HOW YOU CAN HELP SOMEONE ELSE

- If you are concerned about a friend or a housemate, tell them how you feel. They may be a bit uncomfortable and defensive, so try to get them to talk about what is bothering them rather than confronting them
- Sometimes listening can be a great help and problems can seem a bit less overwhelming when they are shared with someone else. This might be the help the person needs to start turning things around. You do not have to come up with answers or solve their problems
- If they want to reduce or stop their drinking or drug use, you can support them by arranging social events that don't involve drink or drugs or perhaps by cutting down yourself
- Confiscating, hiding or controlling or other people's drinking or drug use can lead to arguments and bad feelings. They have to take control themselves or get more specialised help
- You could encourage your friend to get help from someone in the University, eg their personal tutor, particularly if they are running into problems with their work
- Someone who is having a bad experience with drugs may be very frightened. Help them to find somewhere quiet, away from noise and lights and reassure them. If you continue to be concerned, encourage them to get medical help at the Emergency Department of the nearest hospital or from their GP
- If a friend is unconscious or has taken an overdose, they will need medical help immediately. If they are not willing or able to attend hospital or their GP, you will have to take action. If the incident happens in halls or at University, tell staff. If the incident happens at home, you must phone the emergency services. If you know what your friend has taken, give this information to the emergency services. It could save your friend's life
- It can be very frustrating and difficult to have a housemate or friend with a drug or alcohol problem. You may need advice or support for yourself particularly if their behaviour is disrupting your work or peace of mind. You can get support from the Counselling Service on how to manage the situation.

## WHEN SPECIALIST HELP IS APPROPRIATE

### You may want to seek specialist help if you find that:

- You can't manage a day without a drink or drugs
- You have financial problems because of your habit
- You are having conflict with family or friends because of your habit
- You regularly miss lectures or you are finding it difficult to concentrate or motivate yourself to work
- You are using drugs or alcohol to stop yourself feeling depressed.

## WHERE YOU CAN FIND HELP

### INSIDE THE UNIVERSITY

- The **Counselling Service** offers free, confidential, individual and group counselling and workshops to all students. The service also offers support and guidance, to those concerned about the welfare of a friend or relative. To arrange an initial appointment, telephone 020 7911 5000 ext 66899 or email counselling@westminster.ac.uk
- The **Student Advice Service** offer advice and information on funding, benefits, visa and immigration matters. They can be contacted on 020 7911 5000 ext 66080 and at [westminster.ac.uk/advice](http://westminster.ac.uk/advice)
- The **Student Health Service** can offer you information, support, advice and referral for specialist help. Tel: 020 7911 5186 (West End), 020 7911 5000 ext 4107 (Harrow), [westminster.ac.uk/studenthealth](http://westminster.ac.uk/studenthealth)
- The **Student Union** offer advice and support. They can be contacted on 020 7911 5000 ext 5454 and at [uwsu.com](http://uwsu.com)

### OUTSIDE THE UNIVERSITY

- Your **GP** can offer you support, advice, medical treatment or referral to specialist help. All GP practices offer an out-of-hours service for emergencies.
- **London Nightline** offers a confidential telephone listening service, run by students for students, which is available from 6pm-8am every night during term-time, Tel 020 7631 0101.
- **The Samaritans** offer a listening ear 24 hours a day, Tel 116 123, this number is FREE to call.
- Information, resources and links to useful organisations can be found at [studentdepression.org](http://studentdepression.org)

### DETAILS OF OTHER SPECIALIST HELP CAN BE FOUND AT [WESTMINSTER.AC.UK/COUNSELLING](http://WESTMINSTER.AC.UK/COUNSELLING)

#### Acknowledgements:

The Counselling Service at the University of Nottingham has generously given permission for their information to be included in this leaflet. © University of Nottingham  
This leaflet has been developed jointly by the Counselling Service and Disability Service.

The University of Westminster is a charity and a company limited by guarantee. Registration number: 977818 England.  
Registered Office: 309 Regent Street, London W1B 2UW.