

Choose Health, Not Harm Conversation Starter

Experimenting with drugs and controlled substances – like cannabis, hallucinogens, stimulants, nicotine or opioids – can alter your perception of reality and distort your judgment.

While short-term usage can seem harmless, the temporary highs from a substance can pose significant risks to college students' mental health and physical well-being. According to the Drug Enforcement Administration, "7 out of every 10 seized pills contain a lethal dose of fentanyl" (2024). Without knowing it, one-time substance use could have life-threatening or fatal consequences. Talking about substance use is one of the best ways to prevent substance misuse and help to decrease stigma around seeking support.

Use this educational poster and conversation starter to learn more about the reality of substance use on college campuses, distinguish substance use from substance misuse and develop communication skills for discussing substance use issues with peers.

In this document, questions to ask and points to make verbatim are in **bold**. Notes and instructions for facilitators are in *italics*.

INTRODUCTION

Share the print version of the educational poster or show a digital copy in a PowerPoint presentation to the chapter.

Before starting the conversation, the facilitator should introduce the topic by sharing that the discussion will be on substance use, misuse and addiction. Acknowledge that this conversation may be emotionally or mentally triggering for members to engage in. Give participants permission to step away from the discussion at any time for their personal well-being.

Substance use is the act of using any type of mind-altering substance – such as alcohol, illegal drugs, cannabis, cigarettes and prescription medication – that affects your body in a unique way and impacts your ability to interact with the world around you. Improper or chronic use of a substance can lead to a problematic cycle of substance misuse. Continued substance misuse can cause someone to develop a dependency known as a substance use disorder (SUD).

CHAPTER DISCUSSION

What is the difference between substance use and substance misuse?

Allow members to respond.

The main difference between substance use and substance misuse involves the intentions and duration of usage. Substance use is described as causal, prescribed or recreational usage of a legal or illegal drug while substance misuse is frequent, impulsive or uncontrolled usage of a substance. While the intention may not be to do physical harm, both substance use and misuse can have unintended negative consequences. Effects can range from short-term behavior changes and delayed reaction time to more long-term consequences on the nervous system, brain and mental health.

What are the most misused substances among college students?

Allow members to respond.

The most used and misused substances after alcohol are psychoactive drugs, which include cannabinoids (cannabis/marijuana), depressants, hallucinogens, nicotine and opioids. College student substance use has been well researched and shows the prevalence on college campuses:

- 17.2% of students reported past-year use of a prescription ADHD stimulant medication not prescribed to them.
- 40.9% of full-time college students used cannabis in the last 12 months.
- 7 out of every 10 pills seized by the Drug Enforcement Administration contain a lethal dose of fentanyl.
- 54% of college students endorsed using a substance to concentrate on studying.

Because many fake pills or drugs are made to look like other prescribed medications, the potential for taking a lethal dose of fentanyl is high. The safest measure is to only use medication that is prescribed to you by a licensed professional.

What factors influence the harm of a substance?

Allow members to respond.

Drug effects and durations of influence are based on:

- The type and strength of the substance
- How the substance was made
- The amount or dosage
- Frequency of substance use

Can you think of reasons why someone might use or misuse a substance?

Allow members to respond.

Common causes for substance misuse are:

- Social pressure and FOMO (fear of missing out)
- Numbing emotions
- Social anxiety
- Curiosity
- Self-medication
- Perceived benefits
- Coping with stress or mental health challenges

What are early warning signs of substance misuse?

Allow members to respond.

Indicators of potential substance misuse may look like:

- Skipping class or poor academic performance
- Excessive sleeping
- Changes to personal hygiene
- Noticeable changes in mood (angry, sad, irritable, depressed)
- Using multiple substances at a time
- Going out more frequently
- Withdrawing from friends, family and typical activities
- Engaging in reckless or secretive behavior
- Avoiding conversations about substance use

What can prevent someone from seeking help for substance misuse?

Allow members to respond.

Barriers to seeking help for substance misuse can be linked to:

- Fear of judgement from others
- Stigma associated with substance use
- Self-shame
- Experiencing negative withdrawal side effects
- Cost of treatment
- Feeling like there is no solution to stop use
- Not knowing where to go for help

What can you do if someone is experiencing a drug overdose?

Allow members to respond.

Stay with the person and call 911 for immediate emergency medical assistance. Administer Naloxone (common brand name Narcan[®]) if available for someone experiencing a drug overdose from opioids like prescription medications, heroin and fentanyl. It is a temporary treatment method to restore normal breathing function. However, Narcan cannot reverse the effects of all types of drugs or substances (e.g., marijuana, hallucinogens, stimulants, nicotine).

Addressing the root cause of substance use involves talking about substance use itself. Open conversations can help those struggling with substance use to know that there is support in seeking help or treatment.

HOW TO TALK ABOUT SUBSTANCE USE

Starting a conversation about substance use may feel uncomfortable or even intimidating. Using a non-judgmental approach can help a person feel supported in having an open dialogue about their relationship with a substance and encouraging them to make safer, healthier choices.

How can you start a conversation with a friend or loved one about substance use?

Allow members to respond.

The first step in preparing to talk with someone about substance use is to educate yourself on substance use. Learn the terms associated with substance use to better understand their unique challenges and point of view. Research resources available on your campus or in your community to readily share during the conversation.

Practice using person-first language (e.g., “a person struggling with substance use” or “someone who uses drugs”) to reduce bias and stigma when talking about substance use. Be aware of your words and avoid describing someone’s substance use as “abuse” or “addiction”; instead, let the person describe their experience using their own words. Focus on the behavior that you have observed by speaking with care and concern for their well-being. Other conversation tips to consider:

- Plan to talk in person in a private space.
- Establish open communication.
- Be an active listener.
- Ask open-ended questions.
- Repeat answers back for clarity.

- Provide emotional support before/during/after the conversation.

Remember: A conversation about substance use may be an ongoing discussion, not a one-time talk. If someone is resistant to discussing their substance use or unwilling to participate in the conversation, you can stop and reengage in conversation when ready.

College life comes with many new experiences and challenges. Using or misusing substances can add to your stress load and negatively affect your academic success along with your mental health and physical well-being. The temporary highs from substances can have harmful lasting effects that can extend past your time on campus. Choosing health habits over harmful substances can help you live your best life as a student.

ARE YOU OR SOMEONE YOU KNOW STRUGGLING WITH SUBSTANCE USE?

Asking for help is not a weakness. It's a sign of courage and an act of self-care. If you are ready to take control of your substance use, visit [FindTreatment.gov](https://www.findtreatment.gov) or call 800-662-HELP (4357).

REFERENCES:

- [DEA: Fake Prescription Pills](#)
- [Meridian Psychiatric Partners: Drug Misuse, Abuse, and Addiction: What's the Difference?](#)
- Kilmer, J.R. (2024, March 7). Prioritizing Prevention: Alcohol- and Other Drug-Related Considerations with Fraternities and Sororities [Webinar]. Fraternity Executives Association.
- [NIH: Words Matter - Terms to Use and Avoid When Talking About Addiction](#)
- [Southern California Sunrise: Drug Abuse Among College Campuses & Students](#)
- [The Jed Foundation: Understanding Substance Abuse and Addiction Disorders](#)
- [University of Colorado: Tips for Having Conversations About Substance Use](#)
- [U.S. Department of Health and Human Services: U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on Naloxone and Opioid Overdose](#)

