

Substance abuse



The term 'substance abuse' typically creates images of people smoking crack or injecting heroin. But 'substance' means any chemical compound that can alter your thoughts, mood or behaviours. This means that commonplace, legal drugs like alcohol, nicotine and caffeine are also included in this definition. These 'safe' drugs also affect your mood and behaviour, and can be very addictive. They can also cause health problems, and possibly death.

Levels of involvement:

Substance use is the occasional, moderate ingestion of psychoactive substances. It does not interfere with your relationships or work at all. Examples are drinking a cup of coffee to get going in the morning.

Intoxication refers to the physiological reaction to the ingested substance, such as getting drunk or high. Mostly intoxication is experienced as impaired judgement, mood changes, loss of inhibition, and impaired motor ability (trouble walking or talking).

Substance abuse is defined in terms of how significantly the use of the substance interferes with your daily life. If the substance use disrupts your life at work or home, puts you in dangerous situations (like driving under the influence) or results in trouble with the law, you have a substance abuse problem.

Substance dependence involves either a physiological or psychological dependence. *Physiological dependence* is when you need greater amounts of the substance to achieve the same effect (tolerance) or when your body reacts negatively when the substance is no longer ingested (withdrawal). *Psychological dependence* includes the repeated use of the drug, the cravings and behaviour to use more of the drug (for example if you steal money in

order to buy more drugs), and the likelihood that you will use it again after a period of abstinence.

Diagnosing abuse:

Diagnosing a substance abuse or dependence disorder is often complicated by the symptoms of other conditions that occur with the disorder. Do you drink because you are depressed (self-medication) or are you depressed because of your drinking and the consequences it has had on your life? Clinicians try to establish whether a symptom is the result of the substance abuse or not.

Who to call for help:

If you or someone you know is having trouble with substance abuse, there is help available. Speak to a friend/doctor/colleague for the best advice with regard to 'quitting the habit' – whatever that habit may be.

The South African Depression and Anxiety Group (SADAG) has partnered with the Department of Social Development in launching a toll-free substance abuse helpline in an effort to increase access to help, support, and appropriate treatment for substance users.

The toll-free helpline number is 0800 121 314, while SMSes can also be sent to 32312.