

Continuum of Substance Abuse

Alcohol and drug use is generally viewed along a continuum. Individuals may begin at one stage of the continuum and remain stable there or may gradually or rapidly move to another stage, or even skip some stages. It is also important to note that individuals may be at different points on the continuum for different substances.

Stage	Drug Use	Reasons	Consequences
Beneficial Use	Pharmaceuticals, coffee/tea to increase alertness, moderate consumption of red wine, ceremonial use of tobacco	Health, spiritual or social benefit	Positive health, spiritual or social impact
No Use	None	Personal choice, religious or cultural beliefs, health related concerns	No health/social consequences
Experimental Use	Use is often only on weekends Limited to first couple of times person tries a drug	Curiosity Peer/social pressure To rebel	Minimal consequences: ♦ occasional hangover ♦ gain status or friendships ♦ easy to rationalize
Occasional/Social Use	Occurs one to three times per month or less Use is never in excessive manner	Social Positive effects	Minimal consequences Never severe negative results
Regular Use	Use becomes more frequent – may be weekly or even daily Sometimes occurs during the week: before work, lunch, breaks Sometimes stronger drugs are tried Person still using substance responsibly and in controlled manner	Becoming fairly integral part of person's life Friendships are developed with people who are using Most of their friends are doing the same thing to avoid boredom or have fun Role models or adults use in similar ways	Social contacts change and more time is spent with regular users Less time with non-using friends Some negative impacts: ♦ Begin being careless about time, work, rules and personal responsibilities, relationships ♦ May experience more stress ♦ No major interference in any area of life

Stage	Drug Use	Reasons	Consequences
Abuse or Problematic Use	<p>Use tends to become excessive</p> <p>Begins using higher doses due to tolerance, or trying stronger drugs or combining drugs</p> <p>A habit or pattern of substance use is developed and becomes the norm around which activities must revolve</p>	<p>Use becomes a lifestyle preference to cope with negative withdrawal symptoms or avoid stress, feelings, responsibilities, family and other relationship conflicts (which have become increasingly frequent due to progressive drug use)</p>	<p>Work/school performance/attendance/ drops</p> <p>Development of legal and financial problems as well as reputation as user and/or dealer</p> <p>Compromises personal values and/or health</p>
Addiction or Dependency	<p>Drug use becomes a preoccupation, and is the centre of any interaction</p> <p>Inability to predict or control drug use</p> <p>Periods of abstinence tend to be short-lived and very traumatic</p> <p>Activities other than drug use are avoided</p> <p>Extreme intoxication is common.</p> <p>Previously unthinkable methods of using the drugs become possible</p>	<p>To feel acute chemical intoxication</p> <p>To avoid both physical and psychological pain of withdrawal</p> <p>To feel normal</p> <p>To be able to function</p> <p>To forget</p> <p>To medicate mental illness</p>	<p>Serious negative consequences arise in many areas of life</p> <p>Person has difficulty understanding and accepting that drug use may be cause of many problems</p> <p>Physical problems: loss of weight, blackouts, sickness, uncontrollable behaviour like aggression, extreme feelings of guilt and self-hate</p> <p>Illegal activities such as robbery or prostitution</p> <p>Avoids school, work, family, friends and users</p> <p>Isolation</p>

Key Concepts

- Depending on the drug of choice, some individuals may move rapidly through the stages or even skip some stages
- There is loss of choice and control as drug use progresses
- The younger a person is when they choose to use/abuse alcohol and drugs, the greater the risk of abuse or dependency
- The only people not at risk are those who choose not to use drugs at all

Source: "Core Addictions Practice – Participant's Resource Guide"; Fraser Health Authority, Vancouver Island Authority, Interior Health Authority; June 2008