

how do the
drugs I use
affect my
brain?

can I use
drugs and
look after my
mental
health?

are all drugs
equally risky
from a mental
health
perspective?

how can I help
myself or
someone else?

am I anxious
because I'm
using drugs... or
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because I'm
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have I overdone
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all my friends who
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why is it so
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DRUGS & MENTAL HEALTH

YOUTH RISE RESOURCE



YOUTH RISE

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Mental health and drug use

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MOST OF THE DRUGS THAT GET USED FOR RECREATION OR IN DEPENDENCY WORK ON THE BRAIN.

Most of the drugs that get used for recreation or in dependency work on the brain.

They interact with chemicals and nerves in the brain, changing how we think, perceive and feel.

Usually these effects are short-lived. As the drugs are cleared from the body and brain everything goes back to normal...

PEOPLE USE DRUGS FOR LOTS OF DIFFERENT REASONS.

People use drugs for lots of different reasons.

It could be for experimentation, for recreation, for enjoyment.

It could be to help deal with problems.

IT GETS A BIT MORE COMPLICATED WHEN WE START TO THINK ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH.

- Some people might find that using drugs helps them avoid or escape unpleasant mental health symptoms.
- Others find that they feel happier and better when they use drugs
- Drug use may help people feel that they can cope better, fit in or manage moods and emotions.

Everyone else seems happy and like they are having fun. When I use I feel like that too.

I always feel scared...when I use I feel safe at last

All the bad thoughts go quiet when I use.

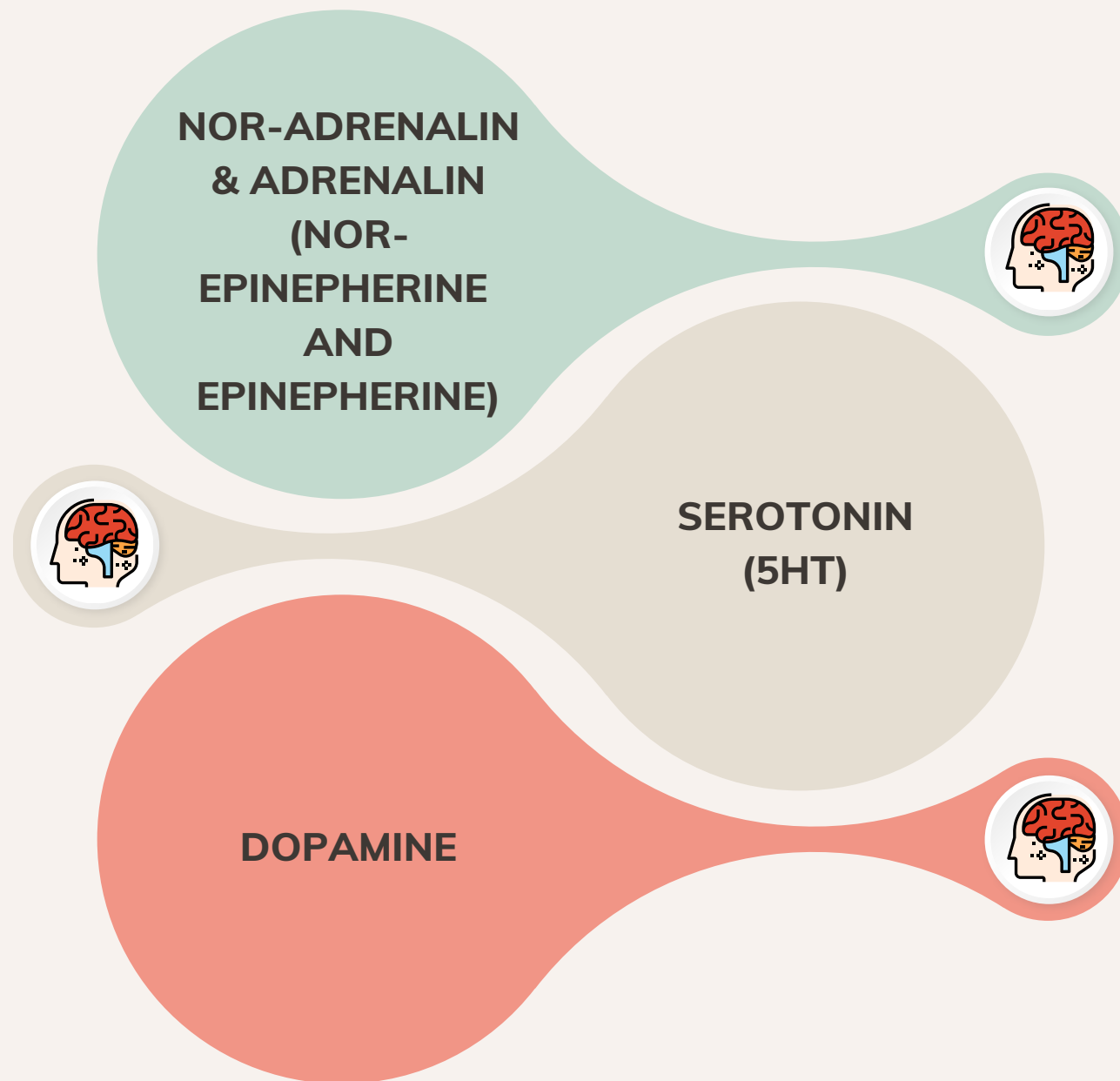
I always feel so low... when I use... for a while I feel better.

The medicine from the Doctor makes me feel so tired so I used drugs to feel awake again.

I can't sleep unless I smoke cannabis

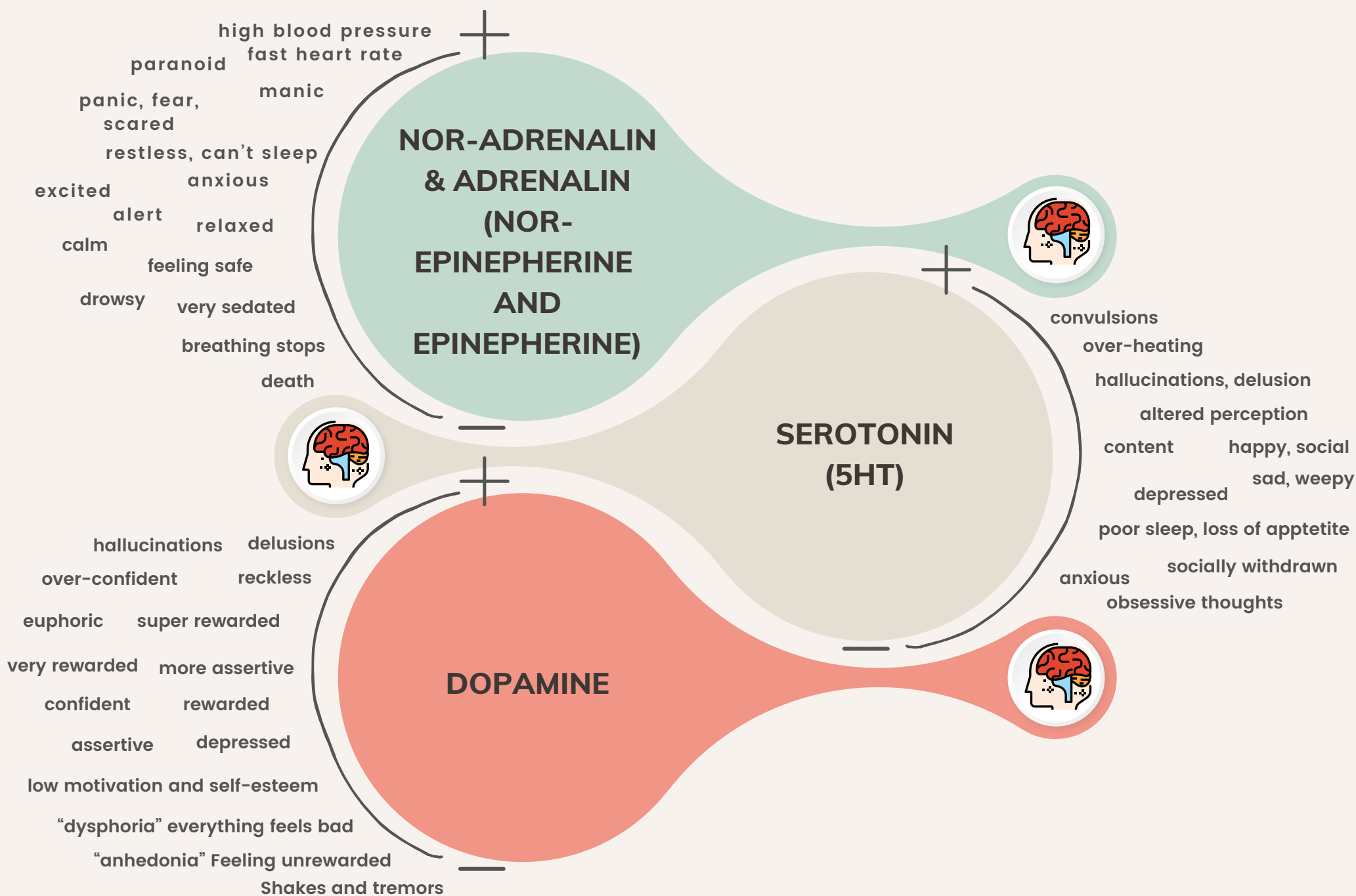
When I use the bad memories don't hurt so much.

Signals in the brain travel along special nerves called **NEURONES**. At junctions between neurones, chemical messengers called **NEUROTRANSMITTERS** are responsible for carrying the signals between the neurones. There are a lot of these chemical messengers. Some of the important ones are shown here.



The brain tries to keep all these chemicals at the “right” levels. Where levels of them are too high or too low it can cause unpleasant mental and physical symptoms. Lots of things could send them out of balance. Mental illness, stress, physical illness and lifestyle could affect them. And so does drug use.

Our neurotransmitters are made in our brains and bodies from building blocks that come in from the food we eat. They are stored in neurones, ready for use. The brain releases chemicals to transmit messages and the recycles them for use later on. Some are broken down by chemicals in the brain and so need to be replaced.



As brain chemicals levels go “too high” or “too low” we might get some of these symptoms. But I might also feel like this for other reasons – such as illness or things that are happening to me in my life.

Some people are drawn to non-prescribed drugs to help them cope with unpleasant mental states.

Sometimes this might involve the same drugs a Doctor would prescribe, but purchased on the streets or off the Internet instead. This might bring legal risks and the risk the drugs may be fake. It also means any other important health care messages from a Doctor aren't given.

Others may end up with non-prescribable drugs, which bring risks of legality, quality and unwanted side effects.

Sometimes use of drugs in this way may bring relief in the short term but may increase risks and problems in the longer term.

There's extra risk if a person uses street drugs on top of prescribed drugs or stops their prescribed drugs suddenly. This could cause life-threatening interactions or withdrawal symptoms.

The pills from the Doctor for my ADHD stop my appetite and spoil my sleep. Smoking weed helps me with this.

I felt depressed and when I drank alcohol I felt happier. But over time the alcohol made my depression worse.

My friend said I should try CBD to help with my anxiety. She said it was better than taking tranquillisers. But I had huge panic attacks when I stopped the tranquilliser pills.

Heroin takes away all my sadness, all my pain and all my grief. I only feel happy when I use it. Otherwise I'm so low.

I used to have very low moods and couldn't go out and see people. I use a small amount of magic mushrooms to help.

I smoke cannabis and it helps with my anxiety and stress. But when I smoke too much I feel even more anxious.

At parties all my friends laugh and fit in. I never do. When I take MDMA I feel like I fit in and I get on with everyone. I don't feel different.

I can't sleep and have panic attacks. I can't register with a Doctor so I buy pills on the street like Diazepam. They help.

I read online that ketamine could help with my PTSD. I bought it on the street and it helped. But when I stopped using the anxiety came back

Lots of drugs can make us feel happier for a while. They can make us feel rewarded. This is often because they are increasing levels of the brain chemicals dopamine or serotonin.

Drugs such as alcohol, heroin, opium, cannabis, amphetamines and MDMA (Ecstasy) increase levels of these chemicals for a short period of time.

But these drugs don't contain dopamine or serotonin. Each time we use the drugs, these chemicals get used up faster and need to be replaced.

The more frequently we use the drugs and the less chance we give ourselves to replace the brain chemicals the more likely it is we will run low of these important chemicals.



**THIS FILLS
UP WHEN
WE:**

- DON'T USE,
- EAT WELL,
- SLEEP,
- GET
SUNSHINE
- EXERCISE,
- MANAGE
STRESS

When levels of the chemicals get too low we start to get all the unpleasant mental health symptoms mentioned before.

It can take quite a long time to fill the tank back up. And using before it's full will be less rewarding AND slow down how long it takes to recover.

Some people may already have had lower levels of these brain chemicals – and so experience low mood. Using drugs will briefly make the person feel better, but after the “tank” will be even more empty...and leaves the person feeling worse than before.

DEPRESSANTS

“Depressant drugs” are a family of drugs that slow down the Central Nervous System. But the name “depressants” is a bit misleading as many of the drugs in this family also cause euphoria especially in the short term.

Key drugs include the opiate family (heroin, morphine, opium, tramadol, codeine, fentanyl,) the benzodiazepine family (diazepam “Valium”, alprazolam “Xanax”, temazepam, Librium, Etizolam), Alcohol, GHB, Pregabalin and Gabapentin.

Key links with mental well-being:

Drugs in this family may provide relief from negative symptoms such as painful memories, anxiety, depression, PTSD, phobias and many other unpleasant feelings. They may offer improved mood, calm, forgetfulness and a sense of detachment.

DEPRESSANTS

The downside: Regular use of drugs in this family will lead to tolerance (needing more for the same effect) and physical dependence. Stopping suddenly could be unpleasant and with some drugs in the family it could be life threatening.

When stopping the unpleasant feelings that made the person want to use in the first place may well come back but even more strongly – so a person using to manage panic and anxiety may well experience very severe panic and anxiety as they try and cut down and stop.



HALLUCINOGENICS

Hallucinogenic drugs include psilocybin (in Magic Mushrooms), LSD, and ketamine. Other drugs which have some hallucinogenic properties include MDMA and cannabis and solvents like glue and petrol.

Hallucinogens can change perception making us process our senses and thoughts in different ways. This could be fun, profound or scary depending on the drug, the setting in which it is taken and the person's own reaction to the drug.

Hallucinogenic experiences can be unpredictable and hard to manage. While some people might want to use them to escape unpleasant thoughts or moods they could worsen feelings of panic or anxiety.

They are especially unpredictable if the person using them is already at risk of delusional thoughts, hallucinations or psychotic episodes.

There is a lot of interest in this family of drugs to help treat mental health problems.

This includes exploring them for anxiety, panic, PTSD, and depression.

While some of the drugs can be legally obtained in some countries for medical use, in others they remain illegal.

Using these drugs to self-medicate for mental illness could cause unwanted side-effects and may be dangerous if you take them on top of medication or stop taking your medication suddenly.

Recreational hallucinogen use always has risks. These can be reduced if you:

- do research into drug effects and doses
- use when you are feeling physically and mentally well
- use in places where you feel safe and with people you trust who will look after you
- you give yourself time to recover after using and look after yourself
- you avoid mixing hallucinogens with other drugs.

Cannabis contains many chemicals. Key chemicals – THC and CBD – have very different effects.

Cannabis use can be rewarding and euphoric but heavy use could deplete levels of dopamine leading to depression

Use of cannabis to help mask problems such as anxiety and insomnia risks leaving those unresolved problems to get worse

THC affects people differently – for some people it will be pleasant and may help mood. For others it may cause anxiety and panic.

Lots of people who overdo it with cannabis will have episodes of panic or anxiety – but these shouldn't last long

Heavy use of strong cannabis in young people is associated with an increase in psychotic-type symptoms in later life – but it's not clear if the cannabis **CAUSED** these illnesses

Some people find CBD helps relieve negative symptoms such as anxiety and panic.

If you start to get more frequent episodes of panic or anxiety or they last longer it's probably time to really cut down or stop using. It's a warning sign that you and cannabis aren't getting on well anymore.



Stimulant drugs include cocaine, amphetamines, khat, betel paan and a lots of newer synthetic drugs.

Recreationally they are popular for energy, confidence, euphoria and late nights. They have a significant impact on mental health during use, after using and with longer term use...

Stimulants cause levels of the brain chemicals DOPAMINE and ADRENALIN to go very high. This causes euphoria, reward and pleasure. It can also feel very exciting but possibly also cause panic and anxiety

Too much of these brain chemicals is less enjoyable. It can cause delusions, and hallucinations. Some of the effects that people get are very similar to psychotic episodes and this can be risky for the person and other people around them...


As the drugs start to wear off brain chemical levels drop lower. This makes the person feel worse than before – craving, depressed and irritable. The risk is they try using again but, the brain chemicals stores haven't recovered yet so it isn't as rewarding.

Using again and again, without giving the brain a chance to recover leaves the person with very low levels of their brain chemicals. This causes severe depression, exhaustion, loss of motivation and possible suicidal thoughts.

For people already experiencing low mood this low period can be very serious.

Avoiding use of stimulants (and other drugs that use up brain chemicals), resting and eating properly can give the brain a chance to recover. For people who have been using a lot for a long time it could take months to recover properly.

For people prone to low mood and depression this recovery after stimulant use is likely to be slower.



Drugs and sex have always been around... and enhancing sexual experiences with drug use is not a new thing.

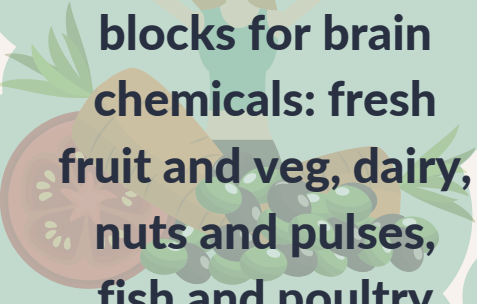
For some people drug use in sexual settings can help people feel more confident, more attractive, less inhibited. It can also help improve or enhance sexual performance. It may help people overcome internalised stigma or shame.

Sedating drugs like GHB/GBL could leave you vulnerable and unable to consent. Other drugs could make you reckless and take risks you wouldn't have taken otherwise.

If you do take drugs in a sex partying or chemsex setting plan ahead and always think about safer sex and safer drug use. Agree with partners what is and isn't OK when you are sober.


Too much use of drugs in a sexual setting can mean people find it hard to enjoy sex without drugs. And the comedown or withdrawal from drugs can worsen feelings of anxiety or low self esteem.

Some specialist services can offer input to LGBTQI+ communities including advice, harm reduction information, PrEP and PEP to reduce risk of HIV, BBV testing and treatment and help where drug use has become a problem.



Healthy diet with lots of the building blocks for brain chemicals: fresh fruit and veg, dairy, nuts and pulses, fish and poultry


With good self care your drug use doesn't have to cause harm to your mental health.



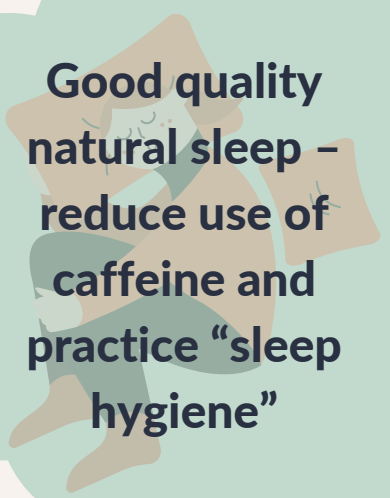
Take breaks from use to allow your brain to recover



Exercise – ideally outside in daylight with a friend




Use relaxation techniques and breathing exercises to manage stress



Good quality natural sleep – reduce use of caffeine and practice “sleep hygiene”

But we all have to look after our brains, even if we don't use drugs. It's even more important if you want to use drugs and stay well.



Talk to your friends about how you feel – and how they can help. Don't isolate yourself

Being mindful and aware of your mood and mental health can help you:

AVOID drug use worsening mental health problems

SPOT where drugs may be having an impact on mental health and
ACT earlier before mental health issues become serious.



- Key warning signs could include:
- episodes of anxiety during or after drug use becoming more severe or taking longer to go away;
 - the “comedown” after using becoming worse and being harder to manage
 - time taken to recover taking longer
 - finding other things that you used to like doing being less rewarding
 - difficulty with sleeping or eating properly

Keep a diary and make a note of how episodes of drug taking may have impacted on mental health:

- how were you feeling before use?
- did you feel anxious or paranoid during use? Was this worse than usual? Did it last longer than normal?
- how long did it take to recover after using? Is recovery taking longer?
 - have you noticed any other symptoms such as feeling more tearful, irritable?
- how has your sleep and appetite been?
- overall how has your mood been before and after episodes of drug use.



If you spot these or other warning signs it's a good time to take a break from using.

If you find this difficult to do it's a sign that you may be struggling to control your use. Speaking to a drug service or other helping agency would be useful at this stage.

Hopefully after a good break and self care your mental health will improve.



Look out for patterns. Learn to spot YOUR warning signs. If you can see them before they get serious you can take action and hopefully prevent a mental health crisis.

If you look after your brain and body, watch for warning signs and act on them as early as possible, you may be able to balance your drug use and maintain your mental health better.

But it is important that you listen to yourself – and other people – so when the warning signs appear you are ready and able to act on them.

If a friend is struggling to cope with their mental health – whether it's to do with drug use or not, their friends can be an important source of health and support.

Let them know that you are there for them: even if they don't want to speak to you straight away – drop them a message every now and then. Balance letting them know you care without making them feel pressured to speak to you.

Remind the person that they are loved, that these unpleasant feelings will go away.

Support the person with the activities which we know are good for their mental health – going for a walk in the sunshine, eating some healthy food, playing with pets or chilling and watching a film together.

Let the person say how they feel and don't make them try and feel differently. Allow the person to be sad. Don't make them pretend to be happy for you.

If you are really worried about your friend, and are concerned they could hurt themselves talk to someone. It may feel like breaking their trust but sometimes it might be essential to keep the person safe.

Don't exclude people who are struggling. Include them in activities but allow them to engage or not as they want to. And if all your activities are drug related maybe think of doing something different that they can take part in which would be better for their mental health.

If you can see early signs that a person is struggling with their mental health try and raise this with them in a sensitive way. Don't judge what they are doing – but talk about that you're worried about them and you care.

Look after yourself too. It's not all on you to look after your friend and you can't take it all on yourself. So practice what you preach and look after your own mental health too.



It's not always easy to speak to professionals like Doctors, especially about drugs and mental health.

You may not have access to a Doctor. You may not want to talk to them about drugs or mental health.

They may not know that much about drugs and mental health!



THERE ARE SOMETIMES WHEN IT WOULD REALLY USEFUL TO TALK TO A HEALTH CARE PROFESSIONAL IF YOU CAN:

- If you are thinking about coming off prescribed medication because you want to self medicate with non-prescribed drugs instead. This could cause withdrawal symptoms so it is essential you do it as safely as possible.
- If you are planning to use non-prescribed drugs on top of your medication: this could cause serious interactions which could be dangerous or life threatening
- If you are experiencing symptoms of poor mental health and they are getting worse, despite or because of your drug use.

If you can't talk to a Doctor or a Nurse about your drug use and mental health there may be a drug support agency locally who can give you advice. These services aren't just for people seeking help for addiction. Some will be able to offer advice and guidance for people who are still using.

Schools and colleges may have support staff who you can talk to for help.

There are lots of good websites who have information about drugs and mental wellbeing so you can read up on other people's experiences.

There may be discussion groups that you can join to hear from other people who may be experiencing the same issues.

The important thing is to know that sometimes you need some help to deal with the problem and knowing where to go and who to speak to can be really helpful. You aren't dealing with this on your own and people out there can and will be able to help.

Created and presented by:

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