

CHOICES

Vancouver Island Counselling
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Understanding Substance Use: When Use Becomes Harmful

Many conversations about drugs and alcohol tend to focus on extremes: either complete abstinence or addiction. The reality is often much more nuanced. Understanding the difference between recreational use, healthy boundaries, and problematic use can help us make informed decisions and recognize when support may be needed.



Not All Substance Use Is the Same

People use substances for many reasons. Some use them socially, some for medical purposes, and others to cope with difficult emotions or life circumstances. While many substances carry risks, the way a person uses them often matters just as much as the substance itself.

Recreational use generally refers to occasional use that does not significantly interfere with a person's relationships, responsibilities, health, or overall quality of life. A person may choose to have a drink at a celebration, use cannabis occasionally, or engage in other substance use without experiencing major negative consequences.

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However, recreational use can become unhealthy when the purpose, frequency, or impact of use begins to change.

Signs That Use May Be Becoming Unhealthy

Rather than focusing only on how much someone uses, it can be helpful to ask:

- Why am I using this substance?
- How often am I using it?
- What happens when I don't use it?
- Is it affecting my work, school, relationships, or health?
- Am I using it to escape difficult emotions?



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Substance use may be becoming problematic when a person:

- Uses substances primarily to cope with stress, anxiety, loneliness, or emotional pain.
- Finds themselves needing more of a substance to achieve the same effect.
- Continues using despite negative consequences.
- Neglects responsibilities or relationships.
- Feels unable to cut back despite wanting to.
- Experiences cravings or withdrawal symptoms.



The Role of Emotional Coping

One of the biggest differences between healthy and unhealthy substance use often lies in its function.

If a substance is occasionally part of social connection, relaxation, or celebration, the risks may be relatively low. However, when substances become the primary way to manage emotions, they can begin to replace healthier coping skills.

While substances may provide temporary relief, they often do not solve the underlying issue. Stress, grief, anger, anxiety, or loneliness may return once the effects wear off, sometimes leading to a cycle of increased use.

Self-Worth and Substance Use

While people use substances for many different reasons, *low self-worth is one of the most common underlying factors associated with unhealthy substance use.*

When someone struggles with feelings of inadequacy, shame, self-criticism, or not feeling "good enough," substances can provide temporary relief. Drugs and alcohol may numb difficult emotions, quiet an inner critic, increase confidence in social situations, or create a temporary sense of belonging. Unfortunately, these effects are often short-lived, and the underlying feelings usually return once the substance wears off.

Over time, this can create a cycle where a person relies on substances to escape painful emotions, while the consequences of substance use further damage their self-esteem. Feelings of guilt, regret, relationship difficulties, financial stress, or health concerns can reinforce negative beliefs about oneself and make it even harder to break the cycle.

How Counselling Can Help

Counselling is not just for people who are struggling with addiction. It can be helpful for anyone who wants to better understand their relationship with substances and the reasons behind their use.

A counsellor can help individuals:

- Explore the emotional needs that substance use may be meeting.
- Identify patterns of self-criticism and negative self-talk.
- Develop healthier coping strategies for stress, anxiety, and difficult emotions.
- Build self-confidence and self-compassion.
- Strengthen relationships and support networks.
- Create meaningful goals and values that support long-term well-being.

One of the most powerful aspects of counselling is that it provides a space where people can be heard without judgment. As self-worth grows, many people find they become less dependent on substances to feel okay, cope with challenges, or manage difficult emotions.

Healing often begins not by focusing on the substance itself, but by addressing the reasons a person feels the need to escape in the first place.

Moving Away From Shame

People often hesitate to seek support because they fear judgment or believe they must hit "rock bottom" before asking for help. In reality, support can be valuable at any stage.

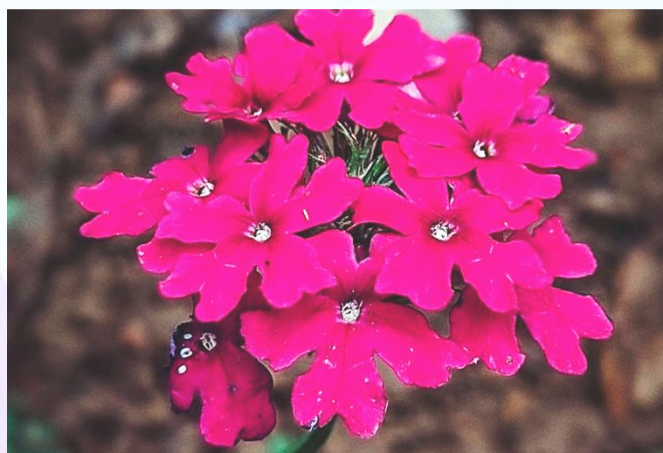
Substance use exists on a spectrum. Someone does not need to have a severe addiction to benefit from exploring their relationship with drugs or alcohol. Small changes in awareness, coping skills, and support networks can make a meaningful difference.



Reflection Questions

Consider taking a moment to ask yourself:

- What role do substances play in my life?
- Are they helping me connect with others, or helping me avoid something difficult?
- What other coping strategies could I develop?
- If I was concerned about a friend using substances the way I do, what would I tell them?



Substances themselves are neither entirely "good" nor entirely "bad." What matters most is the relationship we develop with them. Being honest with ourselves about why we use, how often we use, and the impact they have on our lives can help us make healthier choices.

Awareness is not about judgment, it's about understanding. The more we understand our habits and motivations, the better equipped we are to care for our mental, emotional, and physical well-being.



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