

Avoid drugs and alcohol

During periods of depression and anxiety, it can be tempting to blunt the symptoms by using alcohol or recreational drugs. One of the reasons people take street drugs and drink alcohol is that these substances sometimes make them feel better – temporarily. In the long run they can make problems worse for a number of reasons:

- Problems are avoided rather than being dealt with.
- Performance at work, at home, and in social situations is impaired.
- Psychological and/or physical dependence can develop.
- Physical health can be impaired.

During periods of depression, anxiety, or stress, alcohol and drug use may be particularly tempting – and a particularly bad idea. Your tolerance for their effects and your ability to control your use may both be lower than usual. The situation usually requires concrete, constructive action rather than a retreat into substance use. As well, drugs and alcohol interact with many prescription medications, including most of the medications prescribed for anxiety and depression.

In general, then, it is best to follow these guidelines for a sustaining and sustainable lifestyle:

- Avoid recreational drug use.
- Avoid using alcohol at all during periods of depression or severe stress.
- Avoid using alcohol at all if you have a personal or family history of alcohol abuse.
- Even if you are feeling fine and have no history of abuse, adopt a personal policy to drink only in moderation.

If you are taking antidepressant medication, you should know that recent research has demonstrated that many of these medications cause a mild impairment in motor coordination, similar to having an alcoholic beverage. Even if you ignore the rest of this handout, then, remember one thing. You must not drive after having *any* alcohol while you are on antidepressants. If you usually believe you are fine to drive after a single drink, remember that you may already have the equivalent of a single drink in your system all the time. Adding a beer or glass of wine to this may make you significantly more impaired than it usually would.

The prospect of eliminating substance use from your life can be a daunting one. Remember that while using none is best (particularly in the case of recreational drugs), reducing your intake is better than becoming overwhelmed and giving up. Use the principles of goal-setting to help you examine the problem and overcome it a bit at a time.

How much alcohol have you had over the past week or two? What about other substances?

If you would like to cut back, what is your goal?

What steps could you take that would help you to reach this goal?

If your use of drugs or alcohol is altogether out of your control, you are in good company: Many people have had this problem. A number of organizations exist that can help you to regain control. Consult your physician or therapist for more information.