

Using Drugs to Deal with Stress and Trauma



Are You Using Drugs Because...

- ⇒ You've been through a lot of stress in your life and feel overwhelmed, hurt, or angry?
- ⇒ You're trying to stop hurting, numb yourself out and feel nothing, because many things in your life are going wrong?
- ⇒ You feel really nervous, on edge, irritable, or have trouble sleeping?
- ⇒ You feel afraid, helpless, or horrified about bad things that have happened to you or someone else?
- ⇒ You are anxious, easily startled, really angry, really sad, feel hopeless, or can't concentrate?

Then read on. This booklet may have important information for you.

“Hi. My name is Janice.*

I am 16 years old.

I want to tell you my story.

I've been through a lot in my life and I've made a few mistakes along the way, but I hope that in sharing this with you, maybe your life can be different.”



“Hey, I'm Brian.*

I'm 17 years old.

It's not easy to talk about my problems, but I want to help other kids going through the same stuff. I haven't always made the best choices but I'm really trying to turn things around.”



** The stories of Janice and Brian were created by the authors as a composite representation of stories heard from real teenage clients struggling with these issues. Any identifying details have been removed. Models do not represent actual clients.*

Did You Know That...

Sometimes people turn to alcohol and drugs to deal with stressful and even traumatic experiences.

A traumatic event is a time in your life when something very scary, sad, or dangerous happens to you or someone close to you. It can be something that you saw or something that you went through, and it might have made you believe that you or someone else was going to die or was going to get very badly hurt physically or emotionally.

Traumatic events might happen only once and last a short time, or they might happen many times over many months or even years. After these traumatic events you might have very strong feelings that you feel you cannot control—like feeling really scared, horrified, and helpless.

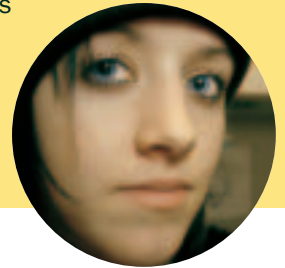
A traumatic event includes being physically or sexually abused or seeing these things happen to someone you care about. Sometimes a traumatic event can be seeing violent things happening in your neighborhood or at school, or when someone you love dies. Being in a natural disaster like a hurricane or tornado, or a disaster caused by people like a fire or terrorist attack are also examples of traumatic events. There can be other forms of traumatic events. If something happens that scares or upsets you to the point that it is very hard for you to deal with, it is a traumatic event.



“I’ve had difficulties all my life. When I was little, my parents were always fighting. At first, I tried to stay out of the way, but when I got tired of it, I started fighting back. As a teenager, I’ve been

kicked out of my house many times, bullied in school, and constantly threatened in my own neighborhood. I started to get really angry at everyone, and eventually I got into a lot of trouble. During the toughest times, drinking and smoking seemed to be the only things I had to look forward to.”

“When I was 6 years old, I remember staying awake at night, in a corner, waiting for the fighting between my parents to stop and hoping that my mom wouldn’t get hurt again. Even for a while after the fighting stopped I couldn’t sleep, and I felt shaky and tense.”



Our Body’s Response...

When we think that something dangerous or threatening may happen, our body’s normal way of reacting is to act as soon as possible to avoid being hurt. This is our body’s natural way of surviving and protecting itself. When we react like this we may have strong physical or emotional feelings, our bodies may get very tense, we may have problems breathing, or we might have other reactions.

Our body’s alarm response begins to work right away to help the organs in the body react better to the threat. There are three ways the body responds: fight, flight (get away from the situation), or freeze (be unable to do anything to help ourselves or even scream, as if we were frozen to the spot). When that alarm begins to work we may feel or experience any of the following:

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Heart pounding• Heart palpitations• Fast pulse• Feeling like you can’t move | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Cold hands• Pale face and skin• Nausea• Feeling like you are detached from yourself | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Sweating• Clammy feeling• Blurred vision• Feeling like you are spacing out into another world |
|--|--|--|

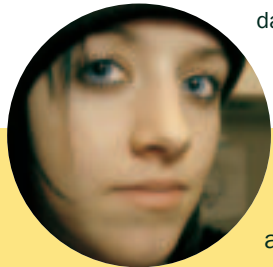


Long-Lasting Reactions...

After we have gone through a traumatic event, sometimes, our body's alarm system begins to work even when there is no danger or threat anymore. These long-lasting reactions to traumatic experiences can include:



- ⇒ **Re-experiencing:** This means we get memories of or feelings about what happened such as a flashback, which is when the body reacts as if we are living through the traumatic event again.
- ⇒ **Avoidance and numbing:** This means avoiding the feelings, thoughts, people, places, and/or activities that might remind us of the event; and feeling like we are outside of ourselves or disconnected from others.
- ⇒ **Increased arousal:** This means being easily scared or startled, having outbursts or fits of anger, having problems sleeping or concentrating, feeling more irritable or angry than usual, and being on-guard for danger all the time.



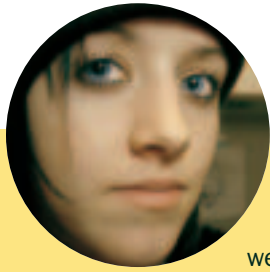
“When I was younger, I was always on edge, thinking about my problems constantly, wondering if my mom and I would be safe. Since I've had stress pretty much all my life, it feels like my brain has been trying to tune out all possible emotions, maybe as a way to protect myself from suffering all the time.

It has taken a while for me to get my life back. I've been numb for so long, it's only now that I'm able to start to feel again. It feels so good now to cry and know why I am sad, to get mad and know exactly what I am angry about, and especially to feel that there is something I can do about these feelings.”

- ⇒ **Trouble managing your emotions:** This means that it is hard for us to control our feelings and emotions. We may feel very anxious, worried, nervous, or fearful, and not want to participate in daily activities like school or social events. We may get angry so fast that it feels like we can't stop ourselves from yelling or acting out. Or we may feel very sad or depressed, and have problems like constant crying, trouble concentrating, irritability, feeling guilty or hurt, or having thoughts of wanting to die.
- ⇒ **Trouble managing behavior:** This means having problems controlling what we do. After experiencing threat or harm, we may still have a lot of anger and may want to get even or protect ourselves. This may lead us to act in aggressive or destructive ways that cause harm to others, such as frequent arguing, fighting, or damaging other people's property. Going through a lot of stress can also lead us to stop trying to protect ourselves and start doing things that are dangerous, risky, or even harmful to us. This may include cutting or injuring ourselves, using drugs or alcohol even after experiencing negative consequences, or putting ourselves in unsafe situations like drinking while driving.



Teenagers sometimes turn to alcohol and other drugs to cope with negative feelings and emotional distress.



Reasons You Might Use...

“I used to drink to feel more comfortable and relaxed when I hung out with people I didn’t know well. I felt like I could talk to anyone and didn’t feel shy like I normally do. When my friends are drinking, I worry what they’ll think if I say I don’t want any. But it wasn’t all about fitting in. If I felt stressed out or upset about something, having a few drinks made me stop worrying about things and forget all my problems.

But drinking started getting in the way of other things in my life. I felt hung over and sick a lot of days and didn’t want to get out of bed. I also did a lot of stupid things while I was drunk, and the next day I was embarrassed and regretted things I done or said. It just didn’t feel worth it anymore...feeling sick and bad about myself for a few hours of feeling good.”

Negative Effects of Using...

Many people use drugs to find temporary relief from their problems, to feel good about themselves and have fun with the people around them, and just to try it out and have a good time. After experiencing a stressful and traumatic event, some people use to avoid having to think about bad things that happened, or to stay away from anything that reminds them about the past. But there are a lot of problems that come with using drugs and alcohol, which are usually much greater than the reason for using in the first place. Some of these negative effects are immediate, and some last for a long time.



- Alcohol:**
- Feeling depressed, slow, sluggish
 - Headaches, nausea, problems walking or moving normally
 - Blacking out (forgetting what you were doing, who you were with, or where you were)
 - Passing out, getting aggressive, getting in or causing accidents
 - Saying/doing things you would not do if you were sober
 - Making a fool of yourself in front of others
 - Death from alcohol poisoning

- Cocaine:**
- Feeling angry, irritable, anxious, restless
 - Feeling paranoid (feeling people are after you or talking about you)
 - Having chest pain, heart palpitations, irregular heartbeat, problems breathing
 - Stroke or seizures
 - Death by overdose

- Marijuana:**
- Poor judgment; poor coordination, blurred vision
 - Anxiety, paranoia
 - Losing your memory, problems paying attention or concentrating
 - Overeating

- Nicotine:**
- Cancer, lung disease, heart problems
 - Trouble catching your breath
 - Bad breath
 - Death

- Ecstasy:**
- Permanent brain damage
 - Paranoia, hallucinations, depression, anxiety, panic, sleeping problems
 - Nausea, fainting, muscle cramping, chills, shaking, problems moving
 - Death from overdose

- Heroin:**
- Paranoia, depression, sleeping problems, nausea, vomiting, stomach cramps
 - Problems having sex
 - Constipation or diarrhea, sweating, overall body pain
 - Risk of HIV/AIDS, hepatitis, or other infectious diseases through sharing needles
 - Death from overdose

- Inhalants:**
- Severe headache, dizziness
 - Brain damage
 - Choking, suffocation
 - Death

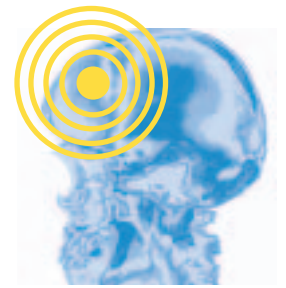
All substances hurt your ability to make good choices. Using them makes it much more likely that you will engage in risky sexual behavior, putting you at risk for getting pregnant (or getting someone pregnant) and catching HIV/AIDS or other sexually transmitted diseases.



“Smoking pot relaxed me and made everything seem more fun. I always heard that smoking pot isn’t even that dangerous, so what’s the big deal if I smoked a joint to make things a little less boring?”

But I decided to quit because it started causing some problems that I didn’t expect. I was having trouble concentrating and started messing up at work. A few times, I almost got fired for the stupid mistakes I was making. I felt lazy all the time and was gaining weight because of how much we’d eat when we got high. Smoking pot made things more fun sometimes, but I didn’t like what it was doing to my body and mind. Eventually, a friend gave me some coke, and after a while smoking weed was not enough. When I got really into it, all I could think about was getting high, and I didn’t care if I got in trouble for it.”

Drugs Damage Your Brain...



Why does using drugs make us feel good or help us forget about the bad things that have happened to us?

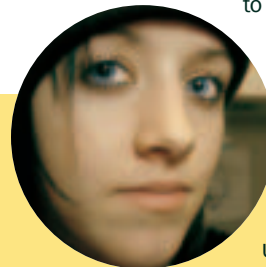
When you do something you enjoy, like eating your favorite food, your brain makes natural chemicals that make you feel good. Your brain remembers these pleasurable events and attempts to repeat that feeling. This is why we want to keep eating our favorite foods, want to hang out with our friends, etc.

Alcohol and drugs affect the same areas of the brain that make us feel good, but drugs and alcohol make these feelings a lot stronger and more intense.

Your brain remembers the good feelings caused by the drug chemicals and wants to feel this way again, so your brain and body begin to really want to use the drugs or alcohol. We call this **craving**. Craving for drugs or alcohol happens after the brain gets used to the effects of having drugs or alcohol.

Your brain often remembers things about the times you used the drugs—like the time of day, places, and the people and things that were there. These things become **triggers** (reminders) for your brain, so when you find yourself in a situation that reminds you of your past drug use you may have cravings.

At the same time, having bad thoughts and feelings—like the ones associated with trauma—can also trigger craving for drugs because the body wants to feel better and wants to stop the bad feelings and have relief.



“I remember everyone always asking me, why do you keep using drugs? Don’t you see you’re messing up your life? Honestly, at that time, it was the only thing that made me feel good. I knew I had a problem, but I couldn’t imagine what my life would be like if I stopped using. It was a big part of my life and I didn’t know any other way to cope with the stuff I was going through. Would my friends still want to hang out with me? Would I still want to hang out with them?”

“If someone would have told me I was going to end up being a slave to the drug, be numb to all feelings, and do things like steal or jump people for watches just to get a little coke, not care about myself and be gross by doing lines off the toilet, I wouldn’t have started in the first place.”



In the Long Term...

The consequences of drugs are so strong they actually change the way your brain works. Over time your brain loses the ability to feel good from the things that used to make you happy, like eating your favorite food, hanging out with friends, etc. The drug craving becomes really strong, creating strong feelings of needing to find and use the drug. Basically, the brain wants the drug chemicals instead of the natural brain chemicals, and it becomes very hard to control this pattern of drug use.

Drugs lose their positive effect on the brain over time. You begin to develop **tolerance**. This means that taking the same amount does not give you the same pleasure. You need more and more of it to get the original effect. At the same time, your body begins to adjust to having the drug and you may notice you start to feel bad emotionally and physically if you stop using the drug. This is called **withdrawal**.



Over time, the brain spends a lot of energy figuring out how to find and get drugs because it wants to find a way to stop bad feelings and the bad physical sensations. This is what we call **addiction**, and once it develops it is very hard to stop. This is why people who get to this point continue to use even when they start to experience some of the other bad consequences of using drugs, like health problems, trouble with the law, failing at school, conflict with parents or friends. Once people become addicted, most lose control of their lives. Willpower alone is not enough to fight addiction. At this point you need professional treatment to stop using.

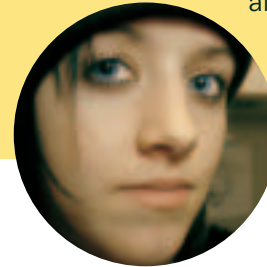


“When you do drugs, people don’t want to have you in their house, you can get diseases, you may do nasty things just to get high, you will feel gross. I always heard people telling me that drugs are bad for me and that people do stupid things when they are high, but I never thought it would actually happen to me. At some point I stopped caring about myself or what I did to get high, and that’s when I realized I wasn’t in charge anymore.”

“I knew I needed help, but I didn’t know where to go. Talking to a teacher or guidance counselor seemed so lame and I didn’t want to be like an after-school special. But I figured it was their job to help kids with this sort of stuff, and I didn’t know what else to do. Telling my story was really hard, but it felt good to get it all out and not be the only one dealing with it anymore. My therapist doesn’t judge me and understands that everyone makes mistakes. When you are lost and start using, you have nothing to hold onto. Kids who have changed their lives for the better actually feel part of something, proud of themselves. When you are drugged, you don’t see the light through the fog. When you see no help you don’t care about yourself.”



“It took me a while to realize I wanted to quit. When I first started getting help, I learned that I didn’t always have to drink or use drugs to deal with my feelings and my worries—I learned that I had other options. So, at first, I decided to stop using so much. Once I did that, I started feeling pretty good about myself, emotionally and physically. I was proud that I could actually take some control over my desire to use. I started to realize my own strength, and with that I decided to quit entirely. If you told me when I first started getting help that I would quit eventually, I would not have believed you. But, after a while, it felt like the right thing to do. I had learned other ways to cope with the problems and stress in my life without turning to drugs.”



Problem Solved?

- ⇒ Using drugs to feel good only works for a short time. Withdrawal, side effects, and long-term consequences can make you feel as bad as before, or worse than ever!
- ⇒ Using drugs can result in trouble with your family, friends, school, and the law; increased risk of car accidents, pregnancy, HIV/AIDS and sexually transmitted diseases; addiction; dependence; overdose; hospitalization, or death.

“I never thought of ‘therapy.’ Agreeing to go the first time was the hardest thing to do. For so long I felt like I should be able to fix things on my own. I was afraid that needing help meant I was weak. But I was wrong—it actually takes a lot of strength and courage to know when it’s time to ask for help. Once I got started, it felt really nice to have support from people around me that cared and knew how to help. It takes work to stop using but I don’t have to do it all alone. I’m learning to make choices that are good for me, and going to therapy was really the first one.



“Of course there are some days I’d rather not talk to my counselor. I’d rather hang out with my friends or watch TV or just relax after a long day. And sometimes I don’t feel like I have anything to even talk to her about. But once I’m there I’m always glad I went. It feels really good to know someone cares about me and wants to listen, even if I don’t think I have that much to say.”

You Decide...

Here are some other ways you can feel good instead of using drugs:

⇒ Therapy:

- Talking to someone (other than friends and family) can help give you a fresh perspective and teach you new ways to cope with problems.
- Therapy can help make you feel understood. With therapy you can learn more about yourself.
- Therapy doesn't have to cost a lot. Talk to your parents, doctors, teachers, or other adults about options that are affordable (or free) in your school or neighborhood.

⇒ Imagine situations in which you might be pressured to take drugs and think of creative ways to refuse:

- Sometimes "just saying no" isn't easy. But there are other ways to refuse, like saying you're on probation and would get in trouble or that you have a test tomorrow and can't risk failing.
- Think of creative ways of saying no that won't lead to more questions or pressure.

⇒ Exercise:

- Going for a run or long walk can have amazing effects on how you feel.
- During exercise your body releases some chemicals (called endorphins), which reduce stress and make you feel better all over.
- In addition to the short-term benefits, in the long run you will have more energy and feel good about your body.

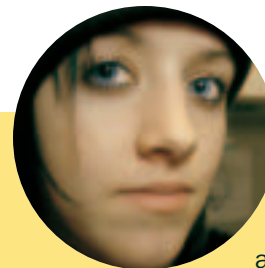


⇒ Try a new hobby or sport:

- Go to your local park and join a pick-up game of basketball or soccer.
- Make a list of things you're interested in and go check out some books from the library to become an expert!
- Art projects can be an inexpensive way to relax and express your creativity...You need only paper and a pencil to become an artist, poet, or songwriter.
- Check out a free local newspaper to see what's going on in your community this weekend. You'll be amazed how much is going on that you never knew about!

⇒ Take care of yourself:

- Eating your favorite foods, renting a great movie, or taking a hot bath can make you feel good about yourself and more relaxed.
- Think about what made you feel good as a little kid and try it again!



“Some friends may tell you there's nothing to live for because your life is crazy anyway, so you might as well use and not care about the consequences. But

nothing feels better than actually going to work, paying for your own things, doing a sport and feeling good about it, or doing an art project or performing and enjoying yourself. Those kinds of things don't leave you feeling guilty and bad about yourself. They end up making you feel great.”

For More Information...

To learn more about substance use, traumatic stress, and many other related subjects, you may want to search the websites of the organizations listed below:

National Child Traumatic Stress Network
www.NCTSN.org

National Institute of Drug Abuse (NIDA) for Teens
teens.drugabuse.gov

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration
www.family.samhsa.gov

For more information, support, or to find a place to get help near you, call:

National Youth Crisis Hotline	1-800-448-4663
National Drug Information Treatment and Referral Hotline	1-800-662-HELP
Nationally Supported Lifeline	1-800-273-TALK
National Runaway Switchboard	1-800-621-4000
National Sexual Assault Hotline	1-800-656-HOPE
National Domestic Violence Hotline	1-800-799-SAFE
National Child Abuse Hotline	1-800-422-4453

In the event of an emergency, always call 911.



About the National Child Traumatic Stress Network

Established by Congress in 2000, the National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN) is a unique collaboration of academic and community-based service centers whose mission is to raise the standard of care and increase access to services for traumatized children and their families across the United States. Combining knowledge of child development, expertise in the full range of child traumatic experiences, and attention to cultural perspectives, the NCTSN serves as a national resource for developing and disseminating evidence-based interventions, trauma-informed services, and public and professional education.

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NCTSN  The National Child
Traumatic Stress Network