

USING ALCOHOL AND/OR OTHER DRUGS TO COPE WITH TRAUMA



If you need immediate support or if you are in danger call 000. To talk to someone now, call the Beyond Blue Support Service on 1300 22 4636 (available any time day or night).

This factsheet provides some important information about trauma. It introduces the link between experiences of trauma and the use of alcohol and/or other drugs to cope.

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought about widespread challenges for all Australians. Increased instability or uncertainty can lead to a spike in stress, anxiety, depression, drinking and/or drug use. For example, in May 2020:



1 in 5 people reported drinking more alcohol compared to before the COVID-19 pandemic and one-third were concerned with how much they, or someone they live with, is drinking¹

We also know that trauma is common:

- 3 out of every 4 Australian adults report experiencing at least one traumatic experience in their life, such as car crashes, crimes of a violent nature, natural disasters or domestic violence.

If you have experienced trauma and think you might have an issue with your drinking or drug use, you are not alone:

- Traumatic experiences are even more common for people who have problems with alcohol or other drugs
- Around 1 in 20 Australians have an alcohol or drug use problem
- Alcohol is one of the most common substance use disorders for people who have experienced trauma²

WHAT IS TRAUMA?

Everyone has different personal definitions of trauma. In general, we can define trauma as an event, or series of events, or circumstances that:

- someone experiences as physically or emotionally harmful and/or a threat to life
- involves extreme stress or shock
- has a negative impact on someone's physical and mental health, relationships, interactions, and activities

For example, emotional, psychological, economic abuse as well as sexual and physical violence are considered traumatic events. These traumas can make someone feel afraid, powerless, and unsafe.



Trauma can pose a big threat to a person's emotional, physical, or social wellbeing. Trauma disrupts or takes away the safe, predictable, and controllable environment (SPACE) that we value in our lives. This is especially true if the person impacted has not had opportunity to process the event. It can change how a person experiences life and sees the world. It can make it harder to respond to challenges, keep relationships, and manage change.

SYMPTOMS OF TRAUMA

While the consequences of trauma are different for everybody, there are some common symptoms that occur. Traumatic experiences can lead to significant changes in your thoughts, emotions, physical experience, and behaviour.

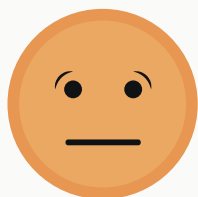
THOUGHTS



**What you think about
yourself, others, and
the world**

- Self-blame
- Intrusive thoughts (memories or thoughts that you can't control)
- Nightmares
- Flashbacks and imagining past trauma
- Trying to block out memories or thoughts
- Finding it hard to concentrate
- Racing thoughts
- Thinking the world is a bad or dangerous place and that people can't be trusted

EMOTIONS



How you feel and respond

- Fear or anxiety
- Sadness, depression, hopelessness, anger, irritability, guilt, shame
- Feeling like you are out of control
- Numbness
- Loss of enjoyment
- Diminished or heightened sex drive
- Feeling as though your emotions 'have a life of themselves'
- Not understanding your emotional responses

PHYSICAL



The impact on your body and your physical responses

- Feeling on edge and on the lookout for danger
- Being easily startled
- Find it hard to physically relax and/or sleep
- Stomach issues and pain
- Sweating
- Fast racing heartbeat
- Teeth grinding and jaw clenching
- Muscle tightness or pain
- Headaches
- Feeling disconnected from your body

BEHAVIOUR



The way you act and the things you do

- Avoiding any places, people, or activities that remind you of the traumatic experience(s)
- Using alcohol and/or other drugs to cope
- Withdrawing from others and isolating yourself
- Not doing the things you enjoy or what matters to you
- Aggression or violence towards others or yourself
- Putting your safety at risk
- Finding it hard to maintain healthy relationships and connections with others

THE LINK BETWEEN TRAUMA AND ALCOHOL AND DRUG USE

- Not everyone who has experienced trauma has a problem with alcohol or drug use. Not everyone who uses alcohol or drugs has experienced trauma. But there is a strong connection between the two.
- Using alcohol or other drugs to cope with the impact of trauma and anxiety, depression, or post-traumatic stress symptoms is sometimes referred to as self-medication.

THE CYCLE OF TRAUMA AND SELF-MEDICATION

Traumatic experiences can make it hard to feel safe and make it incredibly challenging to cope. Many people who access support services for alcohol and/or other drugs report having experienced trauma at some point in their lives.

Using alcohol and/or other drugs to cope is not a moral failing, or about a lack of willpower. Many people report feeling shame about their experiences of trauma and their use of substances and may be reticent to share their experiences with others, for this reason. Self-medication is one way people try to cope with traumatic experiences. It can bring about a sense of relief, control, or coping.

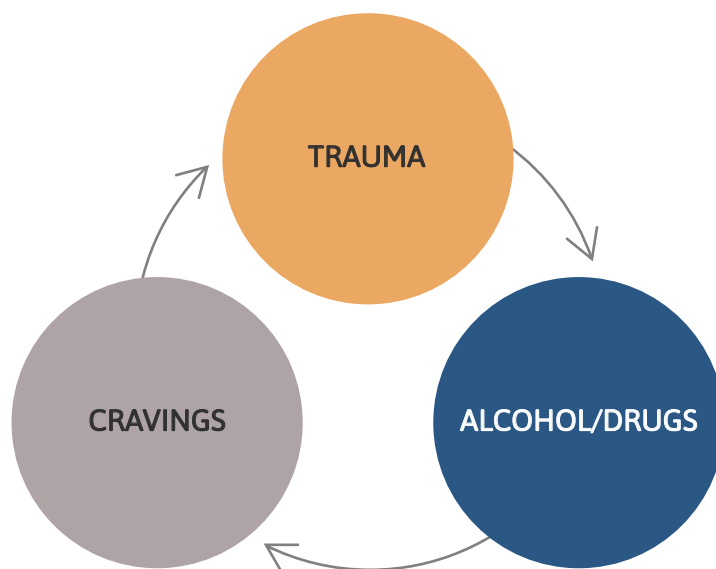


But in the long run, alcohol and/or other drug use can often make symptoms worse. This is because people can find themselves using or drinking more to keep unpleasant thoughts or feelings away. It offers a temporary solution, but it doesn't support long term healing or recovery from trauma. This can lead to a cycle, where increased alcohol and/or other drugs use leads to worse symptoms or new traumatic experiences, which can then lead to even more alcohol or other drug use, which then leads to worse substance use.

Sometimes this cycle can result in the development of an alcohol or drug use disorder (or dependence)*



An alcohol or drug use disorder (sometimes called dependence) refers to the excessive, compulsive, and difficult-to-control substance use or other behaviour that starts to interfere with ordinary life, work, health, or relationships.



The cycle of trauma and alcohol or drug use shows why it can be important to address the symptoms of trauma and drug use at the same time. This is sometimes referred to as comorbidity treatment.

SIGNS OF ALCOHOL AND/OR OTHER DRUG USE PROBLEMS

Many people enjoy a drink every now and then. About 16.4% of Australians have used an illicit drug in the last 12 months³. But when a person starts to notice that their use of alcohol and/or other drugs is causing physical, emotional, social, or economic harm, this can be a sign that there might be a problem.

Issues to look out for are:

- Often using more of the substance than you intend to
- Often thinking you need to cut back or stop using the substance
- Spending a lot of time getting, using, or recovering from the substance
- Craving the substance or noticing symptoms when you stop using it
- Needing more of the substance and building up a tolerance to it

AN EXAMPLE: DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AS TRAUMA

Trauma exposure is especially common for women and children experiencing family and domestic violence. This trauma has increased during the COVID-19 pandemic.



In NSW alone an estimated 17% of women aged 18 years and over (or 1.6 million women) have experienced violence by a partner (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017). Two-thirds of the women experienced worse and more frequent violence and abuse since the start of the pandemic.

Many women may be unable to seek support because of safety concerns or waiting lists for services. Women who are living in violent situations may find that they are drinking more alcohol or using other substances to cope.



Find out more specific information about domestic and family violence in the [Domestic and Family Violence during periods of crisis factsheet](#)

For many women and children, violence is a common and ongoing event that can lead to trauma symptoms:

- Australian women are nearly three times more likely than men to experience violence from an intimate partner⁴
- Domestic and family violence is a leading cause of homelessness for women⁵
- Alcohol may be used as a coping mechanism to deal with and ease the stress, fear, and anxiety caused by violence

In the long run, self-medicating with alcohol can increase the risk of further stress and harm. Alcohol use by both the perpetrator and the survivor is associated with the likelihood of violence occurring. It is estimated that alcohol is involved in up to 65% of family violence incidents reported to the police⁶. This is a safety risk to be aware of, but it is important to remember that it does not mean you are responsible for any domestic violence used against you.

SUPPORT OPTIONS

There is support available and what is important is getting the support that is right for you.

1 TALK TO PEOPLE WITH SIMILAR EXPERIENCES.

This can help you feel less alone. Below is a forum you might want to explore.

Beyond Blue Forums: If you join Beyond Blue's online community you will be able to access their variety of online forums: <https://www.beyondblue.org.au/get-support/online-forums>

2 TALK TO A PROFESSIONAL ONLINE


Many Australian organisations have free, confidential support provided via phone, chat, or email. There are some options included below.

3 FIND PROFESSIONAL ADVICE

The internet provides many avenues to access information, advice and support from domestic violence, mental health, and substance use professionals. You can also speak to your GP for information. We have included some initial contact options below.

FOR VIOLENCE

Domestic Violence hotline:

 1800 200 526

National hotline to provide access to counsellors with sexual assault and domestic violence experience. Confidential support and referral options provided.

1800 RESPECT


 1800 737 732

The domestic violence hotline provides confidential information, counselling, and support 24hrs a day. The service can link you with local domestic violence services, provide legal information and offers a 24hr a day web chat option.

IF THIS HAS RAISED ANY CONCERNS, PLEASE CONTACT ONE OF THE SERVICES BELOW:


This factsheet has included a list of services and resources to support you. Seek professional help if you are feeling overwhelmed or as though you cannot cope.

Lifeline

 13 11 14

 www.lifeline.org.au

National Alcohol and Other Drug Information Service

 1800 250 015

For more evidence-based information, resources and links to support services relating to crystal methamphetamine please visit Cracks in the Ice. The Family and Friends Support Program also provides more information/resources and support for families concerned about a loved ones AOD use.

FOR MORE INFORMATION AND SUPPORT SERVICES VISIT CRACKS IN THE ICE AND/OR THE FAMILY AND FRIENDS SUPPORT PROGRAM

REFERENCES:

1. 4th ANU Poll. <https://ada.edu.au/anu-poll-2020-covid-19-attitudes-and-behaviours-wave-2-may/>
2. Mills, K. L., et al. 2006. Trauma, PTSD, and Substance Use disorders: Findings from the Australian National Survey of Mental Health and Well-being. <https://ajp.psychiatryonline.org/doi/full/10.1176/ajp.2006.163.4.652>
3. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2019. <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/illicit-use-of-drugs/national-drug-strategy-household-survey-2019/contents/summary>
4. ABS 2017. Personal Safety Survey, Australia.
5. Mission Australia 2018. Out of the Shadows: domestic and family violence, a leading cause of homelessness in Australia. <https://www.missionaustralia.com.au/domestic-and-family-violence>
6. FARE 2015. <https://fare.org.au/the-hidden-harm-alcohols-impact-on-children-and-families/>