



## DEPRESSION, ANXIETY, ALCOHOL AND OTHER DRUGS

Substance use—using alcohol, tobacco, caffeine, medicines and other drugs—is part of life for many people. Using these substances can impact our mood and anxiety levels.

Changes in our mood and anxiety levels are part of life. We want to feel well often, with a good mood and no anxiety. It's also normal to feel down or low after a disappointment, loss, frustration, or difficult day.

We can feel anxious before a job interview, move, or situation where we have less control or certainty. We may worry about our health, the well-being of our friends and family members, about a test at school or paying off our bills. If we never felt sad, anxious, or worried, we wouldn't be human.

### **Using substances**

Substance use—using alcohol, tobacco, caffeine, medicines and other drugs—is part of life for many people. Whether people drink coffee to wake up in the morning, enjoy a glass of wine at a party, or take a prescribed medication to reduce pain from a recent injury, using substances is an accepted part of life. Psychoactive substances affect the brain in some way. Using these substances can impact our mood and anxiety levels. However, most people can use substances without experiencing problems.

## WHEN IS IT A PROBLEM?

### **The feelings won't go away**

Moods and anxiety should make sense given what is going on in your life. If you are going through a difficult or stressful time—like a loss, problems at home or work, relationship conflict, or trying to do too much at once, for example—most people will see a drop in mood or a spike in anxiety or both. Mood and anxiety are usually in proportion to the experience. Something that you understand as a minor, easily solved problem or setback doesn't make you feel as low or anxious as a very



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serious problem. Your anxiety and low mood typically start to lift as the problem is resolved.

Low mood and anxiety often go together. A low mood can increase anxiety, anxiety can worsen a low mood, and your mood and anxiety may be affected by the same situation.

If your mood or anxiety don't improve on their own, are out of proportion to events or situations in your life, or interfere with daily life, it's best to talk to a mental health care professional and seek support. These signs don't automatically mean that you have a mental illness. It may be that you simply need more tools to deal with whatever is affecting your life. Many people who don't have a mental illness still find benefit in learning how to manage and cope with difficult feelings, stress, or anxiety so they can live well despite problems. If a mental health professional does find evidence of a mental illness, treating that illness sooner helps you manage symptoms and get back to your usual activities as quickly as possible.



### **Anxiety, depression, alcohol, and other drugs impact each other in many different ways**

Low mood, depression, and anxiety can affect substance use. We may be tempted to turn to alcohol and other drugs to try to cope with anxiety, depression, hopelessness, loneliness, boredom, and other difficult feelings. We may also use substances to help reduce physical pain or uncomfortable side effects of prescribed medications. However, using alcohol and other drugs (that weren't prescribed) to treat a health problem can increase the risk of substance use problems.

For example, occasionally drinking alcohol can help some people relax. However, alcohol can become the only way some people learn to cope and relax. The psychoactive effects of a substance may help to mask symptoms and feelings so some people may turn to a substance more often or use more of a substance to help them cope. As people drink more or most often to cope rather than address the cause or source of the problem, the risk of harm increases.

Alcohol and other drugs can also worsen anxiety and depression. Long-term alcohol use problems and acute alcohol withdrawal often increase anxiety levels. Depression and anxiety are also associated with long-term use or withdrawal from many substances, including stimulants, club drugs, cannabis, opiates, and alcohol. Alcohol use can also interfere with treatment for depression, even when the alcohol use isn't a serious problem on its own.

Finally, substance use and a mood or anxiety problem can share the same cause. There may be a common factor that contributes to both mental health and substance use problems. For example, people who have experiences of trauma are more likely to experience both mental health problems and substance use problems.

## WARNING SIGNS

### Depression

- You feel sad, down, empty, or irritable a lot of the time
- You feel worthless or hopeless
- You've lost interest in activities that you used to enjoy
- You worry a lot about the past or feel guilty about things you can't control
- Your appetite has changed—you feel like you can't eat or eat much more than usual
- You experience problems with sleep—sleeping much less or much more than usual
- You have thoughts of death or suicide
- You have frequent physical symptoms like headaches or stomach aches
- You have difficulty concentrating, remembering things, or making decisions

### Anxiety disorders

- You worry a lot about daily life events or the future
- You experience sudden rushes of intense anxiety or panic out of the blue
- You fear or avoid certain situations, experiences, or things
- You feel like you can't stop or control anxious feelings or worries
- You experience a lot of sleep problems
- You have frequent physical symptoms like headaches or stomach aches
- You have difficulty concentrating or making decisions

These signs don't automatically mean that you have a mental illness. It may be that you simply need more tools to deal with whatever is affecting your life

### Substance use problem

- You use in order to manage difficult feelings or stress
- You often use more than you intended
- You use in unsafe or risky situations when not using is the safest option, like when driving or while taking medications that might interact with other drugs
- Your alcohol or drug use contributes to problems with relationships, money, school or work, or legal issues
- You often find yourself hiding your substance use from others or feel guilty about your substance use
- You feel hopeless or helpless
- You feel tired, run-down, or stressed out
- You have difficulty concentrating, remembering things, or making decisions
- You feel irritable, unreasonably angry, or agitated
- You have a hard time sleeping or sleep much more than usual

As you can see, mood, anxiety, and substance use problems share common warning signs and symptoms. Try not to diagnose yourself. The more information you can give your health care practitioner about the complete range of symptoms you experience, the better they can understand any concurrent problems.

## WHAT CAN I DO ABOUT IT?

The good news is depression and anxiety problems are treatable and you can get support to make changes to your substance use when you're ready.

If you are having thoughts of ending your life, are in a crisis, feel hopeless or helpless, or just need to talk to someone, call the BC Mental Health Support Line at 310-6789 (no area code).

If you are concerned about your substance use and/or mental health, talk to your family doctor. If you don't have a family doctor, you can visit a doctor at a walk-in clinic. They can refer you to more specialized services, if needed.

For more information about local services, call HealthLinkBC at 811 or visit [www.healthlinkbc.ca](http://www.healthlinkbc.ca) for their Find Services tool. You can also talk to a nurse or pharmacist at HealthLink.

For information about alcohol and drug treatment options and resources throughout BC, call the Alcohol and Drug Information Referral Service at 1-800-663-1441. In Greater Vancouver, call 604-660-9382.

For more information, self-help, and other resources, check out the following organizations:

### **BC Partners for Mental Health and Substance Use Information**

Visit [www.heretohelp.bc.ca](http://www.heretohelp.bc.ca) for info sheets and workbooks on depression, anxiety, substance use, and other mental health concerns.

### **AnxietyBC**

Visit [www.anxietybc.com](http://www.anxietybc.com) or call 604-620-0744 for community resources and lots of helpful information about anxiety disorders, including strategies to try at home.

### **Canadian Institute for Substance Use Research**

Visit [www.cisur.ca](http://www.cisur.ca) for information about substance use and safer drinking and safer use of other drugs. You can also check your own drinking habits with the Alcohol Reality Check tool.

### **Mood Disorders Association of BC (a branch of Lookout Housing and Health Society)**

Visit [www.mdabc.net](http://www.mdabc.net) or call 604-873-0103 for resources and information on mood disorders including depression. You'll also find more information on support groups around the province.

### **Canadian Mental Health Association, BC Division**

Visit [www.cmha.bc.ca](http://www.cmha.bc.ca) or call 1-800-555-8222 (toll-free in BC) for information and community resources on mental health or mental illness.



**Canadian Mental Health Association**  
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**Provincial Health Services Authority**  
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Founded in 1918, the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) is the most established, most extensive community mental health organization in Canada. Through a presence in hundreds of neighbourhoods across every province, CMHA provides advocacy and resources that help to prevent mental health problems and illnesses, support recovery and resilience, and enable all Canadians to flourish and thrive.

**Visit the CMHA BC website at [www.cmha.bc.ca](http://www.cmha.bc.ca).**

CMHA BC is proud to be affiliated with HeretoHelp. HeretoHelp is a project of the BC Partners for Mental Health and Substance Use Information, a group of non-profit agencies providing good-quality information to help individuals and families maintain or improve their mental well-being. The BC Partners are funded by the Provincial Health Services Authority.

**For more information, visit [www.heretohelp.bc.ca](http://www.heretohelp.bc.ca)**

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