

# ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

## Alcohol and drug difficulties

Use of substances to change the way we feel is a part of everyday life. Different cultures and groups adopt different drugs. At university alcohol is a very popular one, with a substantial minority also misusing a variety of both illegal and prescription drugs. There is a huge range of reasons for this and the impact on students' lives runs on a continuum from minimal to devastating. Comparatively few students run into serious problems with alcohol and drugs but they are often a contributory factor in depression, academic failure, relationship problems, debt, violence, breaking the law, pregnancy, STDs and suicide.

### DO I HAVE A PROBLEM? WHAT TO LOOK FOR

- Is your alcohol or drug use becoming more frequent?
- Have you had to increase your alcohol or drug consumption to get the same effect?
- Have you tried to cut down or stop but haven't succeeded, struggling with withdrawal symptoms?
- Have people close to you commented on your drink or drug use?
- Do you use alcohol or drugs to suppress feelings?
- Do you wake up feeling depressed or confused after drinking or using drugs?
- Do you regularly have blackouts after drinking or using drugs?
- Have you dropped friends or interests for alcohol or drug use?

If the answer to any of these questions is yes, you may want to think about making some changes.

### WHAT ARE THE RISKS?

Alcohol and other depressant drugs shut down the central nervous system, this relaxation can lead you to become disinhibited, and into a state where the things you say and do are damaging.

Under the influence of stimulants such as amphetamines or cocaine you may become agitated, paranoid and aggressive. Ketamine can induce disorientation and delusional beliefs similar to psychosis as well as causing bladder problems.

'Soft' drugs vary in potency and some now available, for instance skunk and sensimilla are comparatively powerful, with growing research evidence of links to psychiatric problems.

Use of, possession of and supplying of cannabis and other recreational drugs remain illegal. Currently the police will often choose an informal caution for small amounts of cannabis. However, a formal caution – which involves taking fingerprints and the offence remaining on your record for years – is often used for young people. Some students have been jailed for supply of relatively modest amounts of cannabis. Problems of this nature can seriously jeopardise being able to continue with academic studies

### TYPES OF SUBSTANCE USE

Obviously there are different levels of alcohol and drug use. Yours may be 'experimental' – short lived, group based and fairly randomly chosen; or 'recreational', where it is a regular, controlled use of a particular substance – regular pints in the bar or smoking sessions at a friend's flat. Either of these, probably socially motivated activities, have the potential to develop into a psychological and/or physical dependence that becomes increasingly central to your life. Your drug of choice becomes less an experiment or shared pleasure and more something that you need and your easiest way to escape from or temporarily mask difficult feelings.

### HOW CAN I HELP MYSELF?

When drink or drugs become your way of regulating your feelings they will only provide, at best, a temporary relief and are more likely to make things worse. When you notice yourself feeling stressed or low and reaching for your drug of choice, think about doing something different to boost your sense of wellbeing. If there is an on-going problem, why not share your thoughts and feelings with friends, family, or the university Counselling and Well-being service.

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If you want to cut down your use, try keeping a record of what you consume each week. Ask yourself what are the costs – financially, academically, socially and health-wise? Are you really happy with these?

If you are going to go out drinking or clubbing, make sure you are amongst friends you can trust and that they know what you are taking. Be aware that drinks may be "spiked" with a substance unknown to you.

Keep yourself informed about what you are taking and the possible effects, see links at end of leaflet

## HELPING A FRIEND WITH A PROBLEM

You don't need to have all the answers in order to express your concern to a friend, just offer to listen to what is going on for them. Your friend will need to be ready to try and address their problems themselves, so trying to control their intake by, for example, hiding their drink or drugs won't work. If, however, they are interested in cutting down or quitting you could support them by arranging nights in or out that don't involve drink or drugs. You can also inform them about the professional help available both at the University and through the external agencies listed overleaf.

It may be very frustrating for you to have a friend or housemate with a drug or alcohol problem and you may need advice or support with this yourself.

## FURTHER GUIDANCE AND SUPPORT

**University of Reading Counselling service:** 0118 378 4216 or email [counselling@reading.ac.uk](mailto:counselling@reading.ac.uk)

**Reading Drugs Advice Intervention and Skills (includes alcohol)** 38 Queens Road Reading RG1 4AU Telephone: 0118 956 7441 Open access - Drop-In Monday - Friday 13.00 - 16.00

**Alcohol Concern:** Provides information and research about alcohol. [www.alcoholconcern.org.uk](http://www.alcoholconcern.org.uk) has fact sheets and a directory of local treatment services

**DrugScope:** Drugscope is the leading UK charity and the site has a student guide: Telephone: 020 7520 7550; [www.drugscope.org.uk](http://www.drugscope.org.uk)

**Release:** telephone helpline and website for legal advice about drug issues: Telephone: 0845 4500 215; [www.release.org.uk](http://www.release.org.uk)

**NA and AA:** To find your local Alcoholics and Narcotics Anonymous support groups go to: <http://www.alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk/> <http://www.ukna.org/>

Literature/Reading 'First Steps out of Problem Drinking' available in the library

Don't forget that as with all health-related matters, discussing your concerns with your GP is also a good place to start.