

# **Using Drugs to Deal with Stress and Trauma**

**A Reality Check for Teens**

## **Do you use drugs or alcohol because . . .**

*. . . you feel overwhelmed, hurt, or angry?*

*. . . so many things in your life are going wrong that you just want to numb everything out?*

*. . . 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're anxious, easily startled, really angry, really sad, or can't concentrate?*

**Then read on. We have some important information for you.**

## Recognizing Trauma

A traumatic experience is one in which something very frightening, 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 be very badly hurt. Examples of traumatic events include:

- Natural disasters such as earthquakes, hurricanes, or tornadoes
- Man-made events such as a fire or a terrorist attack
- Violent events such as physical, emotional, or sexual abuse, domestic violence, a drive-by shooting, a beating, or a rape

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

When faced with something traumatic, the body's alarm systems go on red alert to help you respond to the threat. As a result, you may feel a range of frightening physical and emotional reactions, including:

- Pounding heart
- Racing pulse
- Sweating
- Nausea
- Cold, clammy hands
- Blurry vision
- Loss of control of your bladder
- Feeling as if you can't move
- Feeling as if you are detached from yourself
- Feeling as if you are spacing out into another world

### **Tony's Story**

When I first got to high school, I didn't want anything to do with drugs. I was really into basketball and wanted to stay clean and healthy to get on the team. That wasn't so easy in my neighborhood. It seemed like everybody was on something. Even my parents: sometimes they'd get high, fight, and whale on my brother and me.

Then my best friend Curtis got killed. We were just standing on the corner and he got shot in a drive-by. I watched him die right there on the sidewalk. It felt like I'd lost a lung or an arm or something. Curtis was the one person I could count on. When things got real bad at home I could always go to his place and hide out. I couldn't believe he was gone.

The nightmares started that first night. Pretty soon I was getting only a couple of hours, sleep a night. I'd walk by the corner where Curtis was shot and see him bleeding to death on the sidewalk. I was jumpy all the time. I kept getting into fights with my brother. It was like the world was coming apart and no one noticed but me.

Sometimes the effects of trauma fade once the event is over. But for many people, the effects of trauma don't disappear with time. Even though the threat is over, their bodies' alarm systems keep working overtime, and their thoughts keep going back to the painful event. As a result, they continue to experience upsetting reactions, such as:

- **Reexperiencing the event** through flashbacks or nightmares, complete with all the physical and emotional sensations they felt at the time
- **Feeling increased arousal**, including 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
- **Having trouble managing emotions** such as anger and sadness. They may feel very anxious, worried, nervous, or fearful, and not want to participate in daily activities like school or social events. They may get angry so fast that it feels as if they can't stop themselves from yelling or acting out. Or they may feel very sad or depressed, and have problems like constant crying, trouble concentrating, irritability, feeling guilty or hurt, or having thoughts about wanting to die
- **Having trouble managing behavior** and reacting in aggressive or destructive ways that cause harm to others, such as frequent arguing, fighting, or damaging other people's property

### ***Karin's Story***

I had my first drink when I was 11 years old. It was in my friend's basement, and even though it tasted kind of like medicine I liked the way it made me feel. My folks drank all the time, so there was plenty of alcohol in the house, and they were too busy fighting with each other to notice what I was doing.

Before I started drinking I used to stay awake at night, waiting for the fighting to stop. I was always on edge, wishing my parents would change. Sneaking a couple of drinks made me stop worrying about things and forget my problems. Drinking made me 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.

If you've been through a traumatic event and are suffering these kinds of reactions, you may be tempted to do almost anything to avoid such painful feelings. You may find yourself avoiding people, places, activities, or even thoughts that remind you of the traumatic experience. You may try to distract yourself by doing things that are risky or even harmful, like driving too fast, cutting or injuring yourself, or bingeing and purging. And—if you are like most people—you may try to shut out the pain by doing alcohol or drugs.

## Reality Check

Many people use drugs or alcohol to relax, feel good, have fun with the people around them, or just to see what it's like. But for people who have experienced a stressful or traumatic event, drugs and alcohol can become more than just a way to relax and have fun.

Instead, using drugs or alcohol becomes a way to turn off the brain and to numb painful memories and reactions. For a while, it may even seem to work. But in the long run, alcohol and drugs just cause a lot of new problems, some of which may be even worse than the original traumatic event.

Alcohol and drugs make you feel good because they affect the “pleasure centers” of the brain. But unlike other pleasant experiences—like eating your favorite foods, exercising, or sex—drugs and alcohol cause much more intense feelings and (in the case of drugs like crystal meth or heroin) a much more intense “crash” when they wear off. This makes it easy to keep turning to alcohol or drugs for relief.

Because the brain remembers things associated with your alcohol or drug use—including times of day, places, and people—these things can become powerful triggers for drug and alcohol cravings. If you're also dealing with the effects of a traumatic experience, things that remind you of the trauma can also trigger cravings for drugs or alcohol to stop the pain.

Over time, your brain can get so used to these outside chemicals that it stops making the naturally-occurring chemicals that allow you to experience pleasure. As

### ***Tony's Story, cont'd***

A couple of months after Curtis died I hurt my ankle during a game. On the way home one of the other guys offered me some Vicodin. For the first time in weeks I slept without nightmares. It felt like a miracle, and when I ran out of the pills my friend gave me, he hooked me up a guy who was selling Vicodin and OxyContin.

Everything was easier when I was high: no dreams, no anger, no seeing Curtis on the sidewalk. Sometimes I'd sleep through the alarm and just not bother to go to school. They ended up putting me on probation and taking me off the basketball team, but I didn't much care. All I wanted to do was feel okay—and the pills were doing it.

### ***Karin's Story, cont'd***

By the time I got to high school I was drinking and smoking pot every day. I figured it wasn't a problem because I could drink way more than most of my friends before I got really drunk. Sometimes they'd make comments about how much I was doing, but I just figured they were jealous. If I felt really sick and hung over in the morning I'd just take a couple of aspirin, or maybe skip school.

### **Tony's Story, cont'd**

Things started falling apart when I lost my job and couldn't afford the pills any more. I kept needing to take more to feel okay, and it was getting expensive. I started stealing from my parents, and when that wasn't enough I tried shoplifting stuff I could sell. One day I got caught, but instead of sending me to juvenile hall the judge sentenced me to probation and drug treatment.

Getting off the drugs was hard, but dealing with the nightmares again was even harder. At first I didn't say anything about them. I didn't want to talk about Curtis, or my family, or everything I'd lost during the months I spent high. But the counselors kept working at it, drawing me out, making me see that I had to face the pain if I was ever going to get better. Telling my story was really hard, but it felt good to not be the only one dealing with it anymore. I realized that I thought I should be able to get through everything on my own, that needing help meant I was weak. But in rehab it felt good to have support from people who cared and knew how to help. And even though there are still times when I really want to use, at least I know I don't have to go through it alone.

the body shuts down production of these natural chemicals, you become more and more dependent on drugs or alcohol and need higher and higher doses in order to feel better—a condition known as *tolerance*. This makes the crash even worse, and can lead to intense cravings and unpleasant physical symptoms (known as withdrawal) when you're not high.

The presence of tolerance or withdrawal is a sure sign of substance dependence, also known as addiction. Once it develops, addiction is very hard to stop. That's why people who get to this point continue to use even when they start to experience some of the nastier costs of using drugs, like fights with parents and friends, getting arrested, failing in school or at work, car accidents, accidental pregnancy, HIV/AIDS or other sexually transmitted diseases, and accidental overdose.

Once people become addicted, they lose control of their lives: everything revolves around their drug or alcohol use. Willpower alone is not enough to fight addiction. The physical and emotional effects are so serious (see **Table 1**) that professional treatment is needed to stop using.

**Table 1. The Down Side of Drug and Alcohol Use**

| SUBSTANCE                 | RISKS  | WITHDRAWAL SYMPTOMS  |
|---------------------------|--|--|
| <b>Alcohol</b>            | Feeling depressed, slow, sluggish<br>Headaches, nausea, problems walking or moving normally<br>Saying/doing things you would not do if you were sober<br>Making an idiot of yourself in front of others<br>Getting into fights or accidents<br>Blacking out (forgetting what you were doing, who you were with, or where you were)<br>Death from alcohol poisoning | Difficulty sleeping<br>Vivid dreams<br>Anxiety<br>Hypervigilance<br>Agitation<br>Irritability<br>Loss of appetite<br>Nausea<br>Vomiting<br>Headache<br>Sweating<br>Tremors<br>Hallucinations<br>Seizures |
| <b>Marijuana, hashish</b> | Overeating<br>Losing your memory, problems paying attention or concentrating<br>Poor judgment, poor coordination, blurred vision<br>Anxiety, paranoia  | Irritability<br>Anxiety and physical tension<br>Decreased appetite and mood  |
| <b>Cocaine</b> (crack)    | Feeling angry, irritable, anxious, restless<br>Paranoia<br>Chest pain, heart palpitations, irregular heartbeat, problems breathing<br>Stroke or seizures<br>Death by overdose  | Irritability<br>Depression<br>Anxiety<br>Angry outbursts<br>Lack of motivation<br>Tiredness<br>Nausea/vomiting<br>Shaking  |

| SUBSTANCE  | RISKS   | WITHDRAWAL SYMPTOMS   |
|--|---|---|
| <p><b>MDMA</b><br/>(Ecstasy, X, XTC, etc.)</p>   | <p>Permanent brain damage<br/>Paranoia, hallucinations, depression, anxiety, panic, sleeping problems<br/>Nausea, fainting, muscle cramping, chills, shaking, problems moving<br/>Death from overdose</p> | <p>Depression<br/>Anxiety (including panic attacks)<br/>Paranoid delusions<br/>Sleeplessness</p>  |
| <p><b>Methamphetamine</b></p>  | <p>Increased heart rate and blood pressure<br/>Memory loss<br/>Heart and nerve damage<br/>Tooth decay and damage, impaired memory and learning<br/>Aggression, violence, psychotic behavior</p>           | <p>Irritability<br/>Depression<br/>Psychotic reactions<br/>Anxiety</p>  |
| <p><b>Opioids</b><br/>(codeine, fentanyl, heroin, morphine, opium, oxycodone, hydrocodone)</p> | <p>Nausea<br/>Constipation<br/>Confusion<br/>Difficulty breathing<br/>Unconsciousness<br/>Coma<br/>Death from overdose</p>  | <p>Nausea/vomiting<br/>Insomnia<br/>Diarrhea<br/>Irritability<br/>Loss of appetite<br/>Shaking<br/>Tremors<br/>Panic<br/>Chills or profuse sweating</p> |

## Beyond Drugs and Alcohol

If you're using—or thinking of using—drugs or alcohol to deal with painful memories or feelings, it's important to remember that there are other options for dealing with the pain besides drugs and alcohol.

One of the most important things you can do is **see a therapist**. Talking to someone other than friends and family can give you a fresh perspective and teach you new ways to cope with your feelings. Keep in mind that 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.

### ***Karin's Story cont'd***

I'd always heard about people doing stupid things when they were high, but I never thought it could happen to me. But one night at a party I started making out with this guy I sort of knew from school. We were both pretty high, and when I tried to stop he wouldn't let me go. He kept kissing me and feeling me up and for the first time in my life I felt like I had no control. I was too wasted to stop him, and before I knew it I was having unprotected sex with a guy I hardly knew. When it was over I panicked. What if he had AIDS? What if I got pregnant? I didn't know who to talk to because I figured everyone would say it was my fault for getting drunk and leading him on.

That night I decided I was never going to get drunk again. But after a day or so of not drinking I started to feel really sick. I got these weird feelings like bugs were crawling all over my skin and I felt really twitchy and anxious. One of my teachers asked me what was wrong and I completely broke down. She brought me to the school counselor and they helped me get into an alcohol detox program.

**Exercise** is a great way to get your body to produce some of the natural chemicals (called endorphins) that make you feel better all over and help reduce the effects of stress. Something as simple as going for a run or long walk can have amazing effects on how you feel. In addition to the short-term benefits, in the long run exercise will give you more energy and help you feel good about your body.

Making the time to **learn something new** is another way to give your mind something to do besides think about your trauma. Make a list of things you're interested in and go check out some books from the library to become an expert!

Getting involved in art can be an inexpensive way to relax and **express your creativity**. All you need is paper, a pencil, and your ideas to become an artist, poet, or songwriter.

If you're not sure what to do or who to hang out with without doing drugs, check out your free local newspaper to [see what's going on in your community](#). You'll be amazed at how much is going on that you never knew about.

## Making Choices

It's not always easy to "just say no" when it comes to alcohol and drugs. There can be many pressures to use, particularly in social situations or when hanging out with friends who use. Although real friends won't care whether you use drugs or alcohol or not, sometimes it helps to have responses prepared in case other people feel like pressuring you. Some creative ways to refuse include:

- I'm on probation and have to pass a drug test tomorrow
- I've got a math (or English, or social studies . . .) final tomorrow that I can't risk failing
- I'm allergic to alcohol
- I have only one lung

When in doubt, use humor—and always remember, it's your choice, not theirs.

### ***Karin's Story cont'd***

Detox was tough, but after a while 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. The counselors and therapists helped me learn ways to cope with the problems and stress in my life without turning to alcohol and drugs. That doesn't mean I don't still want to drink sometimes—I probably always will—but at least now I know there are other ways to make myself feel good.

## For More Information

**To learn more about substance use, traumatic stress, and many other related subjects, check out the following websites:**

|   |   |
|---|---|
| National Child Traumatic Stress Network                   | <a href="http://www.NCTSN.org">www.NCTSN.org</a>                      |
| National Institute of Drug Abuse (NIDA) for Teens         | <a href="http://teens.drugabuse.gov/">http://teens.drugabuse.gov/</a> |
| Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration | <a href="http://www.family.samhsa.gov">www.family.samhsa.gov</a>      |

**For help dealing with trauma or drug abuse—and information on places near you to get help—try:**

|  |                |
|--|----------------|
| 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.

*“Tony” and “Karin” are composites based on the stories of real teenagers dealing with trauma and substance abuse.*

## 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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