

What Is Substance Misuse?

A clear starting point for understanding use, misuse, dependence and harm.

This Support Hub guide is designed to give clear, non-judgemental information you can return to at your own pace. It focuses on understanding the person as well as the substance, recognising risk and knowing where to find appropriate help.

What substance misuse means

Substance misuse describes a pattern of alcohol or drug use that is beginning to create risk or harm. The concern is not about judging a person or applying a label. It is about looking at what is happening to health, emotional wellbeing, safety, relationships, work, education, money and the person's ability to choose when and how they use.

Use, misuse and dependence are not identical

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Why impact matters more than labels

Look at the pattern with curiosity: what happens before use, what the substance changes in the short term, and what happens afterwards. This makes it easier to identify risks, needs and realistic next steps without reducing the person to the behaviour.

Physical, emotional and social effects

A substance may temporarily change anxiety, sadness, grief, shame, sensory overload or intrusive memories. That relief can teach the brain to return to the substance whenever distress appears. Recovery becomes more sustainable when the underlying emotional need is supported as well as the substance use itself.

When to seek professional help

Asking for help does not require somebody to have reached a crisis point. A GP or local drug and alcohol service can discuss options, and national charities can provide confidential information, peer support and family guidance. In emergencies involving collapse, seizure, severe breathing difficulty or suspected overdose, call 999.

Reflection

What am I noticing? What need might the substance be meeting? What is becoming harder because of the pattern? What is one safer or more supportive next step?

Books I recommend exploring

Different books speak to different people. These are starting points rather than a reading list you have to complete.

Beyond Addiction

Jeffrey Foote, Carrie Wilkens, Nicole Kosanke & Stephanie Higgs

Especially useful for family members. It focuses on evidence-informed communication, reinforcement and encouraging change without confrontation.

In the Realm of Hungry Ghosts

Gabor Maté

A compassionate exploration of addiction, suffering and human connection. Best read as one perspective alongside mainstream clinical guidance.

The Biology of Desire

Marc Lewis

Explores addiction through learning, motivation and brain change, offering a perspective that moves beyond simple moral or character explanations.

Places to find help and support

NHS / GP	A GP can discuss alcohol or drug use, treatment options and local services. NHS information also explains that family members should seek support for themselves.
FRANK	Confidential drug information, advice and local-service finder. Helpline: 0300 123 6600. In an emergency after drugs or alcohol, call 999.
Adfam	UK charity focused on families affected by another person's drinking, drug use or gambling. Family members can seek help in their own right.
SMART Recovery / Family & Friends	Practical recovery tools and meetings. The Family & Friends programme focuses on wellbeing, communication, boundaries and reducing unhelpful enabling.
Addiction Family Support	Telephone and email support for people affected by somebody else's drug or alcohol misuse. Helpline: 0300 888 3853.

Safety note

If someone is unconscious, has abnormal or very slow breathing, blue or grey lips, a seizure, severe chest pain, has collapsed or you suspect an overdose, call 999. If physical dependence may be present, seek professional advice before abruptly stopping alcohol, benzodiazepines or other substances that can produce significant withdrawal.

Educational resource - not a substitute for individual medical, psychological, safeguarding or emergency care.