

How Stress & Trauma Influence Use

A trauma-informed guide to triggers, nervous-system overload and substance use.

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.

Stress and the survival system

When the nervous system has spent a long time in threat, substances can become a rapid way to numb, slow down, energise or disconnect. Trauma-informed support asks what happened, what the person is trying to survive and what would create enough safety for change, while still taking harmful consequences seriously.

Why numbing or stimulation can feel necessary

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.

Triggers and learned associations

Triggers can be external - people, places, money, availability or time of day - and internal, such as boredom, rejection, exhaustion, loneliness or overwhelm. Mapping what happens before, during and after use can reveal where a safer alternative or extra support could be introduced.

Safety before change

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.

Trauma-informed recovery

When the nervous system has spent a long time in threat, substances can become a rapid way to numb, slow down, energise or disconnect. Trauma-informed support asks what happened, what the person is trying to survive and what would create enough safety for change, while still taking harmful consequences seriously.

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.

The Unexpected Joy of Being Sober

Catherine Gray

A personal, accessible account focused on alcohol and life beyond drinking. Useful for readers who connect with lived-experience writing.

Changing for Good

James O. Prochaska, John C. Norcross & Carlo C. DiClemente

Explains stages of change and why motivation often develops gradually rather than appearing all at once.

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.

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.