

## Tip Sheet for Carers of People with Mental Illness and Drug Use (Dual Diagnosis)

When we talk about drugs, we mean legal (alcohol, tobacco, prescription medication) and illegal (cannabis, speed, heroin) drugs.

Studies have shown that up to 80% of people with mental illness are using drugs. When a person has both mental illness and misuses drugs, we call this 'Dual Diagnosis'.

Families and carers play a central role in the lives of people with dual diagnosis.

It is very important that family members do not blame themselves for their loved one's drug use.

### Why do people with mental illness misuse drugs?

There are many reasons why a person with a mental illness may misuse drugs, including:

- To help cope with the symptoms of their illness
- To help cope with the side effects of medication
- To feel good
- To feel confident around other people
- To belong to a group
- To escape boredom
- To have fun
- To help sleep

Remember that many people in the community use drugs whether legal or illegal, often for similar reasons to people with a mental illness.

### Which comes first, mental illness or drug misuse?

Mental illness and misuse of drugs can develop over a period of years and can be closely linked.

In many ways it does not matter which came first, as both problems require treatment. A mental illness however, can be more difficult to treat when a person is also using other drugs.

### How do drugs affect medication?

Taking drugs and psychiatric medication together can change the effects of medication. The resulting effect will depend on the amount and types of drug and medications used.

Some effects of combining medication and drugs:

- May increase tiredness or sleepiness
- May impair driving cars or operating machinery
- May cause breathing problems
- May be unpredictable
- May reduce the effectiveness of the medication
- May in some rare cases be fatal



## How can families cope?

Family members may suffer in many ways when they are caring for a person with dual diagnosis.

They may experience:

- worry, sleep problems, fear, confusion, anger, frustration, guilt, loss of hope, alienation from the person they are caring for
- weight loss, violence,
- stigma, loss of friendships, isolation

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### Things that help

- Coming to an agreement about drug use. **It is important to remember that any reduction in alcohol and/or drug use is better than none.**
- Speaking with the case manager, doctor or another carer
- Understanding why the person uses drugs
- Identifying when drug use is likely to occur
- Setting limits on unacceptable behaviour
- Shopping with the person when they receive their income
- Buying only necessary items
- Helping to budget and save for the future

### Things that don't help

- Threatening, criticising, yelling at the person
- Providing cash often or on demand
- Demanding that drug use stop immediately
- Searching personal possessions
- Demanding a urine test
- If something is not working don't keep doing it, try something new

**Under special situations or crises, you may need to act quickly to protect yourself and the other person as safety comes first.**

## Families looking after themselves

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### Things that help

Continue doing things that you enjoy in life:

- practising your religion,
- gardening,
- visiting family and friends
- time with pets
- exercising
- relaxation
- find time to arrange good family time together
- write a list of enjoyable family activities
- maintain respect for family member
- attend family support groups
- seek professional help

## Ways to get help

If English is not your first language please ask for an interpreter.

You may also find it helpful to read other [Help tips in this series especially Help Tip 3: Understanding feelings of guilt and mental illness](#) and [Help tip 4: Recognising the grief response and mental illness](#).

## Places to contact for help

### Family Support Groups

- Carers Victoria **9650 9966** or **1800 242 636** – specific support for carers between 8.30am - 4.30pm
- Family Drug Help line **1300 660 068** – 24 hour support for family members of a person that is using drugs
- Mental Illness Fellowship Helpline **8486 4222** – information on family support groups

### Individual and Family Counselling

- Directline **1800 888 236** – 24 hour counselling and support and referral
- Suicide Helpline **1300 651 251** – 24 hour support and counselling for people that are suicidal
- Kids Helpline **1800 551 800** – 24 hour counselling for young people that are experiencing problems
- Bouverie Centre **9376 9844** – family counselling
- Drug Info **1300 858 584** – information for carers on drugs in different language

