

Clinical Tips: Assessing Substance Use

Holistic assessment: considering the young person's context

Assessing substance use should take account of the young person's:

- Developmental stage
- Patterns of substance use ([see AOD Patterns of Use](#))
- Readiness to change
- Ethnicity
- Gender
- Co-existing needs including other physical and/or mental illnesses, legal problems, housing problems and sexuality issues
- Family factors and home life
- Peers
- School life
- Any medications a young person is taking that may interact with alcohol and other substances consumed
- Who they use substances with, and in what settings they typically use substances

DSM 5 criteria for substance use disorders

The core defining feature of a substance use disorder is continued substance use despite significant substance-related problems (see DSM 5). The diagnosis of a substance use disorder is based upon a cluster of behavioural, cognitive and physiological symptoms related to the use of that substance. To meet criteria for a diagnosis of a substance use disorder, a young person needs to present with a number of difficulties listed below within a 12 month period (see the DSM 5 for specific criteria for different substances). Increasing severity is noted by an increasing number of difficulties experienced. It is not required to have difficulties across each of the four domains to meet criteria for a diagnosis.

Impaired control:

- Consuming more alcohol or other substance than originally planned
- Worrying about stopping or consistently failed efforts to control one's use
- Spending a large amount of time using drugs/alcohol, or doing whatever is needed to obtain them
- "Craving" the substance (alcohol or drug)

2. Social Impairment:

- Use of the substance results in the failure to "fulfil major role obligations" such as at home, work, or school.
- Continuing the use of a substance despite it having negative effects in relationships with others (for example, using even though it leads to fights or despite people objecting to it).
- Giving up or reducing activities in a person's life because of the drug/alcohol use

3. Risky use

- Continuing the use of a substance despite health problems caused or worsened by it. This can be in the domain of mental health (psychological problems may include depressed mood, sleep disturbance, anxiety, or "blackouts") or physical health.
- Repeated use of the substance in a dangerous situation (for example, when having to operate heavy machinery, when driving a car)



4. Tolerance and withdrawal.

- Building up a tolerance to the substance. Tolerance is defined by the DSM 5 as “either needing to use noticeably larger amounts over time to get the desired effect or noticing less of an effect over time after repeated use of the same amount.
- Experiencing withdrawal symptoms after stopping use. Withdrawal symptoms typically include, according to the DSM 5: “anxiety, irritability, fatigue, nausea/vomiting, hand tremor or seizure in the case of alcohol.”