Fresh Start:
Living Beyond Alcohol and Drugs

Introduction

Fresh Start is a program aimed at helping people overcome alcohol and drug problems, and making personally meaningful changes in their lives. Everyone has hopes and dreams. But sometimes these hopes and dreams become lost when people get involved with using substances. It is never too late to get your life back on track, and to make important changes in areas such as relationships, work or school, parenting, and independence.

The Fresh Start program begins with an exploration of your values, and understanding what is important to you. This can help you decide how you would like your life to be different, and the kinds of changes you want to make. Next, the role of alcohol and drug use in your life is discussed, including both positive and negative aspects, to help you make a decision about whether you want to change your habits. Last, you will be helped to develop a plan for overcoming your substance use problems and achieving your personal goals.

Understanding Your Values

Your values are what is important to you in your own life—what you would like your life to be like. Symptoms or substance use may have interfered with getting what you want out of life. Some people have even given up. Don’t give up! There are lots of reasons to be hopeful about getting a fresh start. The first step towards making positive changes and getting the most out of life is to understand what’s important to you.

The following questions may help you clarify your values, and decide which areas of your life you would like to improve:

- What kind of friendships and relationships are important to you? What types of relationships would you like to have? Which of your relationships would you like to
improve (such as with your partner, parents, siblings, or children)?

- Is money important to you? Would you like to change your financial situation?

- Is work important to you? What does work mean to you? What kind of work would you find most interesting?

- How important is education to you? Are you interested in continuing your studies? If so, what type of degree would you like to pursue, or what type of classes would you be interested in taking?

- What do you like to do with your spare time for fun? What kinds of things would you like to spend more time doing, such as hobbies, sports, music, or other activities?

- Is spirituality (or religion) important to you? Would you like to make it a bigger part of your life?

- Is creative expression important to you? Do you like to write, draw, paint, take photos, create a comic book, or express yourself artistically in some other way? Would you like to?

- Are you interested in other arts, such as playing music, singing, or acting? Is this something you would like to do?

- What kind of living situation would you like to have? How important is it to change where you live?

- How important is your physical health and fitness? How would you like your health and fitness to be different?

- How important is your mental health, such as being able to cope with depression, anxiety, hearing voices, or other symptoms? What changes would you like to make in your coping with symptoms?
It may also be helpful to consider the following questions:

- Which areas of life do I feel most satisfied with?
- Which areas of life do I feel least satisfied with?
- What would I like to change?
- What do I want in the future?

These questions can help you identify which areas of your life are most meaningful to you, and what types of changes you would like to make. The following chart can be used to summarize which areas of your life you are satisfied with and which you are not:
## WORKSHEET 1

### Satisfaction with Areas of My life

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area of my life</th>
<th>I am not satisfied</th>
<th>I am moderately satisfied</th>
<th>I am very satisfied</th>
<th>What do I want in this area? (Future hopes)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Friendships</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family relationships</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Intimate relationships</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Living situation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Transportation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Finances</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Work (paid or unpaid)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religion, spirituality</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health (sleep, exercise, diet, etc.)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of alcohol and drugs</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental health (depression, anxiety hallucinations, etc.)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creative expression (painting, poetry, etc.)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fun activities for leisure</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belonging to a community</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other area:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Taking control of your life

In order to take control of your life, and to overcome problems related to alcohol and drug use, it is helpful to set goals for areas of your life that you are not satisfied with. For example, if you are not satisfied with how you spend your free time, you might set a goal of identifying some leisure activities and scheduling time to try them out. Or if you don’t like your financial situation, you might set a goal of getting a job. Working towards these types of goals can help you make your life meaningful and rewarding, and increase your motivation to stop using substances.

Choose some goals that you would like to achieve. It usually works best to start with goals that are relatively small and have a strong chance of being achieved within the next few months. If a goal is ambitious, or looks like it would take a long time to achieve, the next section of this program will take you through a method to break it down into smaller goals or steps that can be achieved within the next few months.

Identifying what you would like to improve in your life will help you set goals.

Questions:
What two areas of your life are you not satisfied with and would like to improve?

What goals would you like to set for yourself in these areas? You can use the following chart to record your goals.
WORKSHEET 2

Working on Goals

Goal #1: __________________________________________

First steps toward the goal:

___________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________

Goal #2: __________________________________________

First steps towards the goal:

__________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________

Fresh Start Educational Handout 6
**Strategies for Achieving Goals**

**Setting goals**

People who are most effective at getting what they want usually set clear goals for themselves and plan step-by-step what they are going to do.

The following suggestions may be helpful:

- Break down large goals into smaller, more manageable ones.
- Start with short-term goals that are relatively modest and that are likely to be achieved.
- Focus on one goal at a time.
- Get support in working on goals; other people’s ideas and participation can make a big difference.
- Don’t be discouraged if it takes longer than you think to accomplish a goal; this is very common.
- If you first attempt to achieve a goal doesn’t work, don’t lose heart and give up. Keep trying other strategies until you find something that works. As the saying goes, “If at first you don’t succeed, try, try again!”

**Planning Steps for Achieving Goals**

Sometimes it’s relatively easy to identify a specific goal and break it down into manageable steps. At other times, you may find it helpful to follow a step-by-step method, such as the following, for achieving goals. This method can also be used to solve problems.

1. Define the goal you would like to accomplish. Be as specific as possible.

2. List at least 3 possible ways to achieve the goal.

3. For each possibility, briefly evaluate its advantages (the pros) and disadvantages (the cons) for achieving your goal.
4. Choose the best way to achieve your goal. Be as practical as possible.

5. Plan the steps for carrying out your decision. Think about: Who will be involved? What step will each person do? What is the time frame? What resources are needed? What problems might come up and how could they be overcome?

6. Set a date for evaluating how well your plan is working. First focus on the positive: What has been accomplished? What went well? Then look at whether your goal has been achieved. If it hasn’t been achieved, decide whether to revise your plan or try another one.

Make a step-by-step plan to help you achieve your goals.

The “Working on Goals” sheet on page 5 can be used by itself or to list the steps that resulted from using the step-by-step goal-setting method.

Questions: What is an example of a goal that you have set in the past? Have you used a step-by-step plan for achieving a goal before?
Summary of the main points about making meaningful changes in life:

- People define what’s important to them in their own personal ways.

- Identifying what you would like to improve in your life will help you set goals.

- Make a step-by-step plan to help you achieve your goals.

- People find their own pathway to making their life more meaningful.

Congratulations

Congratulations on your work so far. Setting goals is an important part of making your life more meaningful. One concern that is often faced when people work to make important changes in their lives is the difficult decision about alcohol and drug use. The next section will help you to make informed decisions about your use of alcohol and drugs as you work to reach desired personal goals.
**Learning about Alcohol and Drugs**

Using alcohol, such as drinking a beer, a glass of wine, or a mixed drink, is common in modern society. Similarly, using certain types of street drugs is also common, such as marijuana, cocaine, amphetamines (“speed”), and hallucinogens (such as LSD and “ecstasy”).

Although using these types of substances can make people feel good, they can also cause problems and make it more difficult for people to manage their psychiatric illness. This part of the handout focuses on the effects of drug and alcohol use on mental illness and other parts of life, and offers strategies for reducing these effects.

**Commonly Used Substances and Their Effects**

It is helpful to understand what people commonly experience when they use alcohol and drugs. The following table lists both the positive and negative effects of alcohol and drugs.
# Commonly Used Substances and Their Effects

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Substance Type</th>
<th>Examples</th>
<th>Positive Effects</th>
<th>Negative Effects</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alcohol</td>
<td>Beer, wine, gin, whiskey, vodka, tequila</td>
<td>-Relaxation -Lighter mood</td>
<td>-Slower reaction time, drowsiness -Socially embarrassing behavior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cannabis</td>
<td>Marijuana, hash, THC</td>
<td>-Relaxation -“High” feeling</td>
<td>-Reduced reaction time and coordination -Apathy and fatigue -Paranoia -Increased anxiety or panic feelings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stimulants</td>
<td>Cocaine (powder/or crack), amphetamines (crystal meth., Dexedrine)</td>
<td>-Alert feeling -Increased euphoric or good feeling</td>
<td>-Increased anxiety -Paranoia and psychosis -Sleeplessness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hallucinogens</td>
<td>LSD, ecstasy, peyote, mescaline</td>
<td>-Increased sensory experiences -Feeling of well-being</td>
<td>-Bad “trips” -Psychotic symptoms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opiates</td>
<td>Heroin, morphine, vicodin, Demerol, opium Oxycontin</td>
<td>-Positive feeling of well-being -Relaxation -Reduced pain sensitivity</td>
<td>-Drowsiness -Highly addictive -Risk of overdose</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### OTHER COMMONLY USED SUBSTANCES AND THEIR EFFECTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Substance Type</th>
<th>Examples</th>
<th>Positive Effects</th>
<th>Negative Effects</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Inhalants</strong></td>
<td>Glue, aerosols, paint</td>
<td>-“High” feeling</td>
<td>-Severe disorientation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-Toxic/brain damage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Caffeine</strong></td>
<td>Coffee, some teas, some sodas</td>
<td>-Alert feeling</td>
<td>-Feeling jittery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-Can interfere with sleep</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Nicotine</strong></td>
<td>Smoking, chewing tobacco</td>
<td>-Feeling alert</td>
<td>-Causes many health problems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-Feels good</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Benzodiazepines (Anti-anxiety medication)</strong></td>
<td>Valium, Xanax, Klonopin Ativan</td>
<td>-Reduced anxiety</td>
<td>-Rebound anxiety when medication wears off</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-Relaxation</td>
<td>-Loss of inhibition and coordination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-Dulled senses</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Why do People Use Alcohol and Drugs?

People have used mind-altering substances for thousands of years, since the beginning of civilization. People use alcohol and drugs for a number of different reasons.

➢ To socialize

Sometimes substances are used in social situations, just for fun. Alcohol and other substances are also sometimes used to celebrate certain holidays (like New Years Eve or the Fourth of July) or a special occasion (such as a birthday, anniversary, or job promotion). People might drink or use drugs to be accepted, to have friends and to avoid loneliness.

➢ To improve mood

Another reason some people use alcohol or drugs is simply that they make them feel good, at least temporarily. Some substances make people feel more alert and energetic. Other substances make people feel tranquil and satisfied, or alter one’s perceptions of the world around them.

➢ To cope with symptoms

Yet another reason people use alcohol and drugs is to cope with negative feelings or troubling symptoms. Substances may be used to deal with feelings of depression or anxiety. Or people may use substances to escape from hearing voices or other hallucinations. For some people, using substances may help them get to sleep when they have trouble sleeping. Other people may use substances because it helps them focus their attention.

➢ To avoid other problems

People may also use substances as a way of distracting
themselves from problem situations or unpleasant parts of their lives. For example, some people may use alcohol or drugs to distract themselves when they are having conflicts with others, when they are under high levels of stress, when they are dissatisfied with parts of their lives (such as not working, not having a nice place to live, or not having good friends), or when they are unhappy with themselves.

For these individuals, substance use may provide a temporary escape from a variety of life problems.

- **It becomes part of a daily routine**

One more reason some people use substances is that it becomes part of their daily routine, and gives them something to look forward to. Everybody needs to have things they care about and look forward to doing, and for some people this includes using alcohol or drugs. For these individuals, using alcohol or drugs is more than just a habit; it is part of their lifestyle and an important part of how they live each day. For some people, they have too much free time in their life and they slip into drug and alcohol use as a way to pass that time.
PEOPLE USE SUBSTANCES FOR MANY DIFFERENT REASONS:

- TO SOCIALIZE
- TO CELEBRATE
- BECAUSE IT FEELS GOOD
- TO COPE WITH BAD FEELINGS OR SYMPTOMS
- TO DISTRACT THEMSELVES FROM PROBLEMS
- TO GIVE THEMSELVES SOMETHING TO DO

People use substances for a number of different reasons. You can use Checklist 1 to list the substances you use and to check off the reasons that you use them.
### WORKSHEET 3

**Reasons for Using Alcohol or Drugs**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason for Using:</th>
<th>Substance #1:</th>
<th>Substance #2:</th>
<th>Substance #3:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Feeling less depressed</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling “high”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling more alert</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Feeling of well-being</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Reducing pain</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reducing anxiety</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coping with hallucinations</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Altering my senses</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sleeping better</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distracting myself from problems</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coping with symptoms</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling sociable</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Giving myself something to do with friends</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Giving myself something to do every day</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Celebrating</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Avoiding boredom</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Peer pressure</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Substance Use and the Stress-Vulnerability Model**

Using alcohol and drugs is common. However, these substances can interfere with the ability of people to manage their mental illness. The stress-vulnerability model of mental illness helps explain how using substances can make the symptoms of mental illness worse.

The symptoms of mental illnesses are caused by biological factors (or vulnerabilities). These biological vulnerabilities can be made worse by:
- alcohol and drugs
- stress

These biological factors can be made better by:
- medications
- effective coping
- social support
- meaningful activities

Alcohol and drug use can make symptoms worse and cause relapses. Using these substances can also interfere with medications, making them less effective at reducing symptoms and preventing relapses. Because even small amounts of alcohol or drug use can cause these problems, people with psychiatric illness can be described as putting themselves at a real risk of setting off symptoms when they use.

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**SOME PEOPLE WITH MENTAL ILLNESS ARE HIGHLY SENSITIVE TO THE EFFECTS OF ALCOHOL AND DRUGS**
Problems Related to Alcohol and Drug use

The positive effects of using substances are well known, such as the way they can make people feel good and provide a temporary escape from unhappiness. However, using substances can also have negative effects and can interfere with having a good quality of life. Understanding both the positive and negative effects of using substances can help in deciding whether to change this habit. Some of the common problems related to drug and alcohol use are described below.

- **Increased symptoms/relapses**

  Using substances can bring on symptoms, or make symptoms worse. Common symptoms that can be worsened from using substances include depression, anxiety, hallucinations, delusions, and thinking difficulties. Sometimes increases in symptoms can lead to relapses and re-hospitalizations.

- **Social problems**

  Substance use can cause conflicts with other people. People may have disagreements about someone’s use of substances, or be worried that the person uses too much. Substance use can also make people less predictable and harder to get along with. For example, someone may be very irritable because he has a craving to use substances. Or someone may be late coming home because she was using substances.

  Using substances can result in other social problems as well. Sometimes people are not able to meet others’ expectations because they are using substances, such as being a good parent, keeping the house clean, or preparing family meals. Using substances can also cause problems related to hanging out with the wrong types of people. For example, using substances with others may increase the
chances of being arrested due to their illegal behavior, being evicted from housing, or being taken advantage of either sexually or financially. People may act like they are your friends, but only because you have something they want, such as your money or the use of your apartment.

- **Interference with work or school**

  Using drugs and alcohol sometimes gets in the way of work or going to school. People may have difficulty focusing at work and doing their job well. Or they may be late or have absences from work due to using substances the night before. Using substances can also make it hard to focus on schoolwork and can contribute to dropping out of school.

- **Daily living problems**

  Sometimes when people use substances they have a harder time taking care of themselves. They may not shower, brush their teeth, or keep up their appearance like they ordinarily would. People sometimes do not eat well when they’re using substances. They may also not take care of their living space, such as their room or their apartment.

- **Legal problems**

  Using substances can cause legal problems. Driving under the influence of alcohol or drugs, for example, is against the law and can result in severe penalties. People can also be arrested for possessing illegal drugs.

  Drug and alcohol use can cause other legal problems. Sometimes parents with substance use problems have their children taken away from them, or may face restrictions on their ability to see or parent their children. Using disability money, such as SSI or SSDI, on drugs or alcohol can lead to restrictions on access to that money,
and the need to have a representative payee (or some other legal representative) manage one’s money.

- **Health problems**

Using substances can lead to a variety of health problems. Long-term alcohol use can produce many problems, including liver problems such as cirrhosis. The use of some substances such as cocaine, heroin, and amphetamines is linked to infectious diseases such as hepatitis C and the HIV virus. These are blood-borne diseases that can be spread through exposure to an infected person’s blood, such as by sharing needles (injecting) or straws (snorting) for using these drugs. When people have substance use problems, they often neglect to take care of chronic health conditions such as diabetes and heart disease. Because of the physical effects of using substances and the neglect of one’s health, substance use can shorten one’s lifespan.

- **Safety problems**

Sometimes people use substances in situations that are not safe. For example, driving under the influence of alcohol or drugs can be dangerous. Similarly, operating heavy machinery when under the influence of substances can be dangerous. Finally, people sometimes put themselves in risky situations in order to obtain substances, such as going to bad neighborhoods, and associating with people who may take advantage of them or harm them.

- **Psychological dependence**

Using alcohol or drugs can play an important part in people’s lives. *Psychological dependence* refers to when someone spends a great deal of time using substances, gives up important activities in order to use, often uses more than intended, or has repeatedly tried to stop unsuccessfully in the past.
Physical addiction

When people use substances very frequently, they often need to take larger amounts to get the same effect, because they develop tolerance to the substance. They may also experience withdrawal symptoms if they don’t use the substance, such as feeling shaky or nauseous. These are symptoms of physical dependence.

Using substances can cause:

- Symptom relapses and rehospitalizations
- Social problems
- Work/school difficulties
- Daily living problems
- Poor self-care
- Health problems
- Legal problems
- Safety problems
- Psychological or physical dependence

Using substances can interfere with having a good quality of life. You can use Checklist 2 to list the substances you commonly use and to check off the negative effects that you have had from using these substances.
# WORKSHEET 4

**Negative Effects of Using Alcohol and Drugs**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Negative results from drug or alcohol use:</th>
<th>Substance #1:</th>
<th>Substance #2:</th>
<th>Substance #3:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relapses</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Hospitalization</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>My symptoms get worse</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>I have conflicts with others</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>People complain about my use</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>I get more irritated at others</td>
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<tr>
<td>People can’t count on me</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>I lose friends</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>I hang out with a bad crowd</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>People take advantage of me</td>
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<tr>
<td>I don’t take good care of myself</td>
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<tr>
<td>I spend too much money</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have legal problems</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have health problems</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>I lost housing</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>I do unsafe things</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>I had problems with my job</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alcohol and drugs take over my life</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>My relationships suffered</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Weighing the Pros and Cons of Using Substances

Deciding to stop using alcohol and drugs can be a difficult decision to make. There are some positive aspects to using substances, such as socializing and feeling good, but negative aspects as well. One way to help you make a decision about using alcohol and drugs is to come up with a list of all the “pros” (advantages) of using substances, and all the “cons” (disadvantages) of using substances. To best understand your own pros and cons for using substances, complete Worksheet 1 on the following page. You can use the information on Checklist 1 and Checklist 2 to help list the pros and cons on the worksheet.
### WORKSHEET 5

**Pros and Cons of Using Substances**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>“PROS” of using substances</th>
<th>“CONS” of using substances</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>List all the advantages of continuing to use drugs and alcohol. (Consider advantages such as: socializing, feeling good, escaping, coping with symptoms, something to look forward to, habit, and any others that might be important.)</td>
<td>List all the disadvantages you can think of for using substances. (Consider disadvantages such as: worse symptoms or relapse of mental illness, conflict with family or friends, trouble with work or school, parenting difficulties, problems with health, legal system, housing, or money.)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Considering all the “pros” and “cons” of using substances, would you like to cut down/stop?

- _____ NO. I do not want to cut down or stop.
- _____ MAYBE. I think I might want to cut down or stop but I’m not sure.
- _____ YES. I would like to cut down or stop.
Deciding Whether to Get Sober

Understanding the “pros” and “cons” of using substances can help you decide whether you want to continue using. It is also helpful to consider the “pros” and “cons” of not using substances. What are the advantages of developing a sober lifestyle? What would have to give up in order to develop such a sober lifestyle? On the following page, complete Worksheet 2 to consider the “pros” and “cons” of becoming sober.
# PROS of becoming sober

List all the advantages to developing a sober lifestyle. Consider how sobriety may help you achieve personal recovery goals, such as better control of your mental illness, better relationships, more independence, better health, ability to work and go to school, better parenting, fewer legal, housing, money, or health problems.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PROS of becoming sober</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>List all the advantages to developing a sober lifestyle. Consider how sobriety may help you achieve personal recovery goals, such as better control of your mental illness, better relationships, more independence, better health, ability to work and go to school, better parenting, fewer legal, housing, money, or health problems.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

# CONS of becoming sober

List what you think you might have to give up if you stop using substances. Consider the “costs” of sobriety, such as losing friends, nothing fun to do, troubling symptoms, no escape, and feeling bad.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CONS of becoming sober</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>List what you think you might have to give up if you stop using substances. Consider the “costs” of sobriety, such as losing friends, nothing fun to do, troubling symptoms, no escape, and feeling bad.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Considering all the “pros” and “cons” of sobriety and the “pros” and “cons” of using substances (Worksheet 1), would you like to cut down/stop?

- _____ NO. I do not want to cut down or stop.
- _____ MAYBE. I think I might want to cut down or stop but I’m not sure.
- _____ YES. I would like to cut down or stop.
Developing a Sober Lifestyle

When people decide to develop a sober lifestyle, it takes planning and practice. Sometimes there can be setbacks along the way, such as urges to use substances, slips in substance use, or relapses of substance abuse. Developing your own personal plan for a sober lifestyle is an important part of managing your mental illness and achieving your personal recovery goals. There are four important steps to achieving sobriety:

- Remember your reasons for not using substances.
- Get support for your decision to get sober.
- Develop a plan to prevent going back to using substances in “high risk” situations.
- Identify new ways of getting your needs met.

Tips for accomplishing these steps are provided below:

Identifying Personal Reasons For Not Using Substances

Whenever someone decides to reduce or stop using substances, it is important for them to identify their personal reasons for wanting a sober lifestyle, and to regularly remind themselves of these reasons. In what ways could sobriety help you achieve your personal recovery goals? Consider possible reasons such as:

- Better ability to manage mental illness (fewer relapses)
- Improved social relationships
- Improved ability to work or go to school
- Having your own apartment
- Being a better parent
- Fewer legal problems
- More money to spend on other things
Getting Support For Your Decision to Get Sober

Whenever you decide to make a personal lifestyle change, it helps to get the support of at least one person who cares about the change you want to make. Finding someone who can support you in overcoming your alcohol and drug use problems, and becoming sober, can help you achieve your goals. Having a person in your life who is supportive gives you confidence that someone is on your side, rooting for you. It also helps to have someone you can turn to when you need help or just someone to talk to.

When thinking of someone who can support you, it is important to consider a person who does not have an alcohol or drug problem. Overcoming substance use problems involves spending more time with other people who live sober lifestyles, and less time with people who use substances, so that you have fewer temptations to begin using again. You may be able to think of someone who used to have substance use problems but no longer does. People who are in recovery from substance use problems can be very supportive because they understand your experience, and can help you succeed in building a new, sober life.

Here are some examples of people who might be able to support you:

- A family member, such as a brother, sister, parent, aunt, uncle, or adult child
- A friend
- Your spouse, partner, boyfriend or girlfriend
- A member of your religious community
- A teacher with whom you have a good relationship
- A sponsor or another member of a self-help group for drug and alcohol problems, such as AA (Alcoholics
Exploring Self-Help Groups

Self-help groups such as AA, NA, or Dual Recovery Anonymous can be very helpful places to meet people who can support you in your goal of becoming sober. Everyone in a self-help group has struggled with alcohol or drug problems, and like you, everyone has made a personal decision to become sober. There are many different self-help groups available, and each group has its unique character. It might take some time to find the right group for you. It’s perfectly fine to go “meeting shopping” to check out different self-help groups to find the right one. Finding someone to go with you can make it easier to choose the right group, and connect with people you feel comfortable with. Self-help groups have helped millions of people like you reclaim their lives from addiction.

Dealing With “High Risk” Situations

In order to be successful in stopping substance use, it is helpful to make plans about how to deal with situations in which one has used substances in the past. These situations, sometimes called “high risk situations,” often involve other people, but not always.

- Being offered substances by friends
- Being pressured to use substances by friends or acquaintances
- Running into a former drug connection
- Holidays
- Going to a party
- Having money in your pocket
• Feeling bad (such as feeling depressed, anxious, or frustrated
• Having nothing to do
• Spending too much time alone
• Remembering good times related to substance use

Avoiding these situations can reduce the risk of relapse. However, complete avoidance is not always possible. Effective strategies for dealing with “high risk” situations are critical to developing a successful sobriety plan. Specific high-risk situations are described below along with some possible strategies to manage those situations.

➤ **Social situations**

Social situations involving offers or pressures to use substances:
• Decline in a firm voice tone
• Don’t make excuses for “no” (it invites debate)
• Repeat the refusal if needed
• Offer an alternative activity if it is a friend
• “Level” with friends or relatives about the importance of your sobriety and ask them to respect it
• Leave the situation if necessary

➤ **Cravings**

Having cravings to use substances:
• Distract yourself by doing something that focuses your attention elsewhere
• Cheerlead with self-talk, “I can cope,” etc.
• Use relaxation techniques until cravings pass
• Use prayer
• Contact a friend
Money

Having money in your pocket:
- Plan ways to put money in a safe place and at a distance from you
- Problem-solve ways to avoid direct access to money

Symptoms

When things aren’t going well, such as experiencing depression, anxiety, hallucinations, or sleep problems:
- Depression
  * Schedule pleasant activities
  * Challenge negative thinking
  * Exercise
  * Use positive self-statements
- Anxiety
  * Use relaxation techniques
  * Challenge thoughts that cause you to worry
  * Gradually expose oneself to feared but safe situations
- Hallucinations
  * Distract yourself with other activities
  * Accept the voices or other hallucinations without giving them undo attention or control over your life
  * Use relaxation to tolerate the distress
- Sleep problems
  * Avoid caffeine use in the afternoon
  * Avoid naps
  * Go to bed at the same time each night
  * Develop a pleasant nighttime routine (e.g., reading, watching TV)
Finding New Ways of Getting Your Needs Met

In order to develop a sober lifestyle, it is important to develop new ways of getting your needs met that do not involve using substances. Common needs for using substances include:

- Socializing with others
- Feeling accepted by other people
- Feeling good
- Escaping boredom
- Dealing with bad feelings
- Help with sleeping
- Having something to do and look forward to

Developing new ways of getting your needs met can take time and effort. However, the rewards of a sober lifestyle and the ability to achieve personal recovery goals make the effort worthwhile.

Examples of People Who Are Achieving Personal Recovery Goals

When people begin to adopt a sober lifestyle it can be encouraging to hear about others who have made this decision and experienced some of the benefits. If you are beginning to plan how to cut down or stop using alcohol and drugs, reading the following examples may be helpful.

“I used to think alcohol was my best friend, but now I know better. It was always there when I needed it, and I organized my life around drinking, either alone or with other people. But drinking cost me a lot—it made my symptoms worse and caused hospitalization, I couldn’t hold down a job, and I couldn’t take care of my kids. Now that I’m sober I’m back in control of my life; I’ve stayed out of the hospital,
I’m working again, and I can be a better mother, and role model, for my kids.”

_Glorissa, 38 years old with bipolar disorder, sober for 8 years._

“Getting off drugs was tough going for me. I thought using drugs was the solution to all my problems, either getting high or zoning out. Learning new ways of dealing with my depression, my voices, and my sleep problems helped me control my urges to use drugs. I had to make new friends, too, and these friends seem to really care about me. I feel a lot better about myself now that I have my own apartment and I’m going back to school.”

_Jerome, 28 with schizoaffective disorder, sober from cocaine (crack), speed, and marijuana for 14 months._

**Question:** Whom do you know who has made positive changes in their life because of cutting down (or stopping) substance use?
**Abstinence or Cutting Down?**

Deciding to take control over one’s life by addressing problems related to drug or alcohol use is an important decision that involves changing one’s lifestyle. Part of making such a decision involves deciding whether to stop using substances altogether (abstinence) or to cut down but not stop using entirely.

People with substance use problems often find it difficult to cut down on using substances, because using even a small amount makes them want to have more. In addition, because of the biological nature of psychiatric disorders, people with a mental illness can be very sensitive to the effects of even small amounts of alcohol and drugs. This means that those small amounts of substances can have very serious effects. For this reason, many people with drug and alcohol problems are more successful developing an abstinent lifestyle rather than cutting down how much they use.

Some people want to work on their substance use problems, but are not ready to stop using completely. For these people, reducing the amount of alcohol or drugs that they use can be a good first step towards sobriety.

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**ABSTINENCE IS THE BEST WAY OF**
**OVERCOMING**
**SUBSTANCE USE PROBLEMS**

**Question:** Have you (or someone you know) tried to cut down or stop using substances in the past?
What happened?
Continuing a Sobriety Effort After Fresh Start Has Ended.

Getting continuing support for your sobriety after the Fresh Start effort has ended involves enlisting other people and groups who will join you in that effort. Support might come from family members, treatment staff, peers, a sponsor from a self-help group, or members of a church, synagogue, or community group. Many people find it helpful to develop a network of people who can provide support. It is important to reward supportive people for their efforts so they will want to continue to help. That means taking their help seriously by doing your part to participate actively on a sobriety plan, and by showing your appreciation for their help.

Making a Personal Sobriety Plan

In order to achieve your sobriety goals, it is helpful to develop a specific plan. This plan should include the steps described above: identifying your reasons for wanting to decrease or stop using substances, identifying high risk situations and coming up with strategies for dealing with them, developing other ways of getting your needs met that do not involve using substances, and determining ways to get support to continue your personal sobriety plan after the Fresh Start effort has ended. Worksheet 3, on the following page, can be used to help you develop your personal sobriety plan.
CONGRATULATIONS! You’ve taken the first and most important step toward ridding your life of problems related to alcohol and drugs. Complete this plan by following the steps outlined below. You can change or modify your plan based on how well it is working for you. Share your plan with people who are close to you so they can support you in achieving your goals of sobriety.

**Step 1.** List one to three reasons how your life will be better by cutting down or stopping using substances. Consider how sobriety may help you achieve your personal recovery goals.

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**Step 2.** Write down at least one person who supports you in your goal of getting sober. Think of someone who doesn’t have problems with alcohol or drugs. This person might be someone you know from a self-help group, such as AA or Dual Recovery Anonymous. Think of someone who will support your personal sobriety plan after the Fresh Start effort has ended.

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- 

**Step 3.** Identify one to three “high risk” situations that can lead to unwanted use of alcohol or drugs. Consider situations in which you have used substances in the past, such as people offering you substances, being pressured to use, feeling bad, having nothing to do, and cravings.

- 
- 
-
Step 4. Make a plan for how to deal with those “high risk” substance use situations. For each “high risk” situation, identify one or two ways of dealing with it.

Situation 1:
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
Plan for dealing with it:
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

Situation 2:
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
Plan for dealing with it:
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

Situation 3:
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
Plan for dealing with it:
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
**Step 5.** Find new ways of getting your needs met. Consider the ways substances have met your needs in the past, such as hanging out with friends, feeling relaxed or “high,” dealing with symptoms, or having something to do. What needs did they meet? For each need you identify, think of at least one new strategy for getting that need met.

**Need 1:**  
__________________________________________________________________________  
__________________________________________________________________________  
Strategy for meeting this need:  
__________________________________________________________________________  
__________________________________________________________________________  
__________________________________________________________________________  

**Need 2:**  
__________________________________________________________________________  
__________________________________________________________________________  
Strategy for meeting this need:  
__________________________________________________________________________  
__________________________________________________________________________  
__________________________________________________________________________  

**Need 3:**  
__________________________________________________________________________  
Strategy for meeting this need:  
__________________________________________________________________________  
__________________________________________________________________________  
__________________________________________________________________________  

Fresh Start Educational Handout
Recovery from Substance Use Problems

Taking control over your life and tackling your substance use problems can be hard work, and there may be setbacks along the way. However, your strength and determination will pay off as you become sober and reclaim your life. You have every right to be hopeful that recovery is possible, and that you can take charge of your own life and grow past the effects that substances have had on it!