Understanding the mental health effects of street drugs



understanding

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This booklet is for anyone who wants to know about the effects of street drugs on mental health, including anyone who takes them or has dual diagnosis. It explains how taking street drugs can affect your mental health, and how different types of street drugs can affect your mental health in different ways. It explains different options for help and treatment, and includes information for family and friends.

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What are street drugs?

Street drugs are substances people take to give themselves a pleasurable experience, or to help them feel better if they are having a bad time, or simply because their friends are using them. They include heroin, cocaine, cannabis, alcohol and some prescribed medicines.

Street drugs may be:

- legal such as caffeine, nicotine and alcohol.
- illegal this means it is against the law to have them or supply them to other people. Most street drugs are illegal.
- controlled these are drugs used in medicine, such as benzodiazepines (see p.9). It is legal to take controlled drugs if a doctor has given you a prescription for them, but it is illegal to have them if not. It is also illegal to give or sell them to anyone else.

The way street drugs are legally classified does not reflect how harmful they are to your mental health. Illegal, controlled and legal drugs can all have a negative impact on you, whatever class (A, B or C) they are given.

How can street drugs affect your mental health?

All street drugs have some kind of effect on your mental health. They affect the way you see things, your mood and your behaviour.

These effects may be pleasant or unpleasant. They might be short-lived, or you may experience longer-lasting effects. In some cases, these effects may be similar to those you experience as part of a mental health problem. They may go away once the drug has worn off, or they may not, and you may experience longer-lasting effects.

For some people, taking street drugs can also lead to long-term mental health problems, such as depression and schizophrenia.

It is difficult to predict how you will react to a street drug. You may react differently to the same drug at different times or in different situations.

This may differ depending on:

- the type of drug
- whether the drug has been mixed with other substances, and what these other substances are
- the amount you take
- the environment or social situation in which you take it
- how often you take it
- your previous experience of it
- what you want and expect to happen
- your mental state.

If you have a history of experiencing poor mental health, this may mean you are more likely to experience negative effects if you take street drugs.

However, if you have previously had no mental health problems, you may still develop symptoms of a mental health problem from using these drugs.

If you take street drugs a lot, or become dependent on them, this can have a negative impact on your day-to-day life. For example, it could lead to:

- financial problems
- · problems with education and employment
- relationship problems
- problems with housing
- low self-esteem
- finding it hard to maintain commitments, including appointments related to your drug use or mental health
- crime either in possessing an illegal substance, or to finance a habit, leading to a criminal record
- imprisonment.

Dual diagnosis

If you have both mental health problems and problems with drug or alcohol use, you may be described as having dual diagnosis. There is no standardised treatment for dual diagnosis, because it includes a large number of possible problems, and involves both drug and alcohol services and mental health services. If you have this combination of problems, you may need help with many different parts of your life. (See 'What treatments are available?' on p.21 and 'What support services are available?' on p.23 for more information.)

What are the mental health effects of different drugs?

There are four main groups of street drugs, divided according to their major effects, plus a few substances that do not easily fit into any category. The main categories are:

- stimulants
- depressants
- opium-related painkillers
- · hallucinogens.

The mental health effects listed in this section are all possible effects of each drug. This doesn't mean that you will definitely experience these effects. Nor is it right to assume that someone showing the symptoms listed here must be taking drugs.

All of these drugs can also cause physical side effects, some of which can be unpleasant or even dangerous. For more information about physical effects of street drugs, see the Frank or Erowid websites. (See 'Useful contacts' on p.28.) If you take street drugs, remember that you don't always know what is in them so it can be difficult to predict how you will react. They may not contain any of the substance you are expecting, and could also contain harmful substances.

Alcohol

Alcohol is the most toxic of the commonly used drugs, but moderate use is not usually a problem. The long-term effects listed are associated with drinking a lot over a long period of time. These effects will go away if you stop drinking.

If you think you may be addicted to alcohol and want to give up, get all the advice and information you need and seek medical help if possible – it can be dangerous to stop drinking suddenly.

Type of drug	Depressant
Short-term effects	 Feeling relaxed and more sociable to begin with As the depressant effect sets in, you may need to drink more in order to recreate these pleasant effects Large amounts can cause uninhibited behaviour or aggression
Long-term effects	Short-term memory lossDifficulty thinking clearlyDifficulty with problem-solvingPoor concentrationAddiction
Dependency and withdrawal symptoms	 Anxiety Delirium (which may include confusion, disorientation and hallucinations)

Amphetamines; methylamphetamine (crystal meth)

The effects of crystal meth are similar to crack cocaine, but they last longer. For more information, see 'Crack cocaine' on p.12. If you have experience of a mental health problem, you are more likely to experience negative effects.

Type of drug	Stimulant
Short-term effects	Increased attention and alertnessReduced tirednessIncreased energy and confidence
Long-term effects	AgitationConfusionAggressionCan cause symptoms of psychosis, such as paranoia
Withdrawal symptoms	AnxietyDepressionTirednessIrritability

Anabolic steroids

Anabolic steroids are taken to increase muscle bulk and enhance sporting performance. The short- and long-term effects of steroids will disappear if you stop taking them. However, the symptoms of dependency may continue.

Type of drug	Stimulant
Short and long-term effects	AggressionDramatic mood swingsConfusionSleeping problemsDepressionParanoia
Symptoms of dependency	Extreme tirednessDepression

Benzodiazepines

Benzodiazepines are prescribed for anxiety and as sleeping pills (see Mind's online booklet *Making sense of sleeping pills and minor tranquillisers*). People take them illegally to increase the effects of similar drugs, such as alcohol or opiates, to counteract the effects of stimulants, such as ecstasy or amphetamines, or to help with stopping smoking. Benzodiazepines can be very addictive, and stopping taking them can be very difficult.

Type of drug	Depressant
Short-term effects	Negative effects: Feeling agitated Aggression Feeling hostile Positive effects: Reduced tension and anxiety Lucidity Feeling calm and relaxed
Dependency and withdrawal symptoms	Sleeping problemsAnxietyIrritabilityHeightened senses

Buprenorphine

Heroin addiction is often treated with buprenorphine or methadone. These are both prescribed as heroin substitutes and recommended by NICE (the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence). Buprenorphine (trade name Temgesic) is less sedating than methadone, and so may be preferable if you are working, or if you drive.

Type of drug	Opium-related painkiller/depressant
Short- and long-term effects	 Depression Loss of libido Hallucinations and other symptoms of psychosis Feelings of detachment

Caffeine

Caffeine is present in drinks that most people have every day, such as coffee and tea. It is also present in chocolate, and is added to some manufactured drinks such as colas. You can buy it in tablet form too.

Type of drug	Stimulant
Short- and long-term effects	 Agitation Finding it difficult to relax

Cannabis (marijuana, hemp, hashish, grass, skunk)

People take cannabis as a way of relaxing and getting high. The effects you experience will largely depend on whether you are used to taking the drug, how much you take and the type of cannabis you use. If you have experience of anxiety and depression, you are more likely to experience negative side effects.

Type of drug	Stimulant, depressant and hallucinogen
Short-term effects	 Feeling relaxed Talkative Finding things very funny and laughing a lot Feeling excited by the things you see, hear and feel Hunger High doses may cause: Distorted perceptions Forgetfulness Distress and confusion Psychotic experiences (hallucinations and other experiences which other people don't share)
Long-term effects	 Long-lasting symptoms of psychosis that may be diagnosed as schizophrenia May cause depression in later life if you use it a lot as a teenager

Cocaine, crack cocaine

Cocaine comes in two forms: cocaine powder which is snorted, and crack cocaine which is smoked. Both forms may be injected. Cocaine is notoriously impure, and often contains other substances. Cocaine is extremely addictive, and it is very difficult to stop taking it. If you have a mental health problem, cocaine can make this worse.

Type of drug	Stimulant
Short-term effects	 Feeling wide awake Full of energy Feeling confident High doses may cause: Hallucinations and delusions Depression
Long-term effects	 Suicidal thoughts Depression Anxiety Panic attacks Paranoia Irreversible brain damage A worsening of pre-existing mental health problems
Dependency and withdrawal symptoms	Loss of energyPsychosisDepressionAkathisia (a feeling of intense restlessness)

Ecstasy (MDMA)

Ecstasy tablets are notoriously impure, and often contain substances other than MDMA.

Type of drug	Stimulant
Short-term effects	 Feeling happy and relaxed Feelings of empathy, openness, caring and emotional closeness to others
Long-term effects	 Depression, which does not respond to antidepressants Loss of confidence Anxiety Confusion Agitation and teeth clenching Panic attacks after repeated use Hallucinations and paranoia after repeated high doses

Heroin (diamorphine)

The main effects of heroin are pain relief, and euphoria – but also depression. It is a painkiller, prescribed as diamorphine. Many drug treatment programmes are geared to helping people who are addicted to heroin and other opioid drugs. Naltrexone (Nalorex) is a prescribed drug that eliminates the positive experiences associated with opioid use. If you are being treated for heroin addiction, naltrexone may be prescribed to help you stay off it. The main problems arise because it is very addictive.

Type of drug	Opium-related painkiller/depressant
Short-term effects	 A rush of pleasure, followed by a calm, warm, dreamy contentment Drowsiness Talkativeness Loss of appetite Insomnia Lethargy
Long-term effects	 Loss of appetite Apathy Neglect of personal safety and hygiene Generalised pain when the level of drug in your system drops
Dependency and withdrawal symptoms	 A craving that leads to serious social problems including crime Severe physical withdrawal symptoms A tolerance of the drug, which means you need to take more of it to achieve the same effect

Ketamine

Ketamine is an anaesthetic, mainly used in animals. It is similar to PCP (see p.18).

Type of drug	Hallucinogen
Short-term effects	 Poor concentration Changed perception of surroundings – things not looking right or not feeling right Feeling out of touch with reality and with your surroundings Delusions Paranoia Dream-like states Nightmares Feeling you have no thoughts A bad trip may make you violent, suicidal or likely to harm yourself
Long-term effects	Difficulty thinking clearlyDepressionPanic attacksAnxiety
Dependence and withdrawal symptoms	TirednessDepression

Khat

Khat is a green, leafy plant that has been chewed in East Africa for thousands of years. Khat is illegal in some parts of the world. It is currently not prohibited in the UK, but this may change.

Type of drug	Stimulant
Short-term effects	 Feeling elated and energetic Not being able to sleep Loss of appetite Relaxation Feeling sociable Hearing voices (associated with high doses) Paranoia (associated with high doses)
Dependence and withdrawal symptoms	 Tiredness Depression Anxiety Irritability

LSD (lysergic acid diethylamide)

LSD is a synthetic drug that was first made in the 1940s. It causes random and sometimes frightening effects which may be delayed. As LSD causes you to hallucinate and lose touch with your surroundings, it can cause people to do dangerous things. In some cases, people have died due to dangerous behaviour as a result of taking LSD.

Type of drug	Hallucinogen
Short-term effects	 Detachment from surroundings Altered sense of space and time Hallucinations Feelings of insight, mysticism and spirituality Feeling you can fly Anxiety (associated with a bad trip) Feeling panicky (associated with a bad trip)
Long-term effects	 Likely to make existing symptoms of schizophrenia worse Flashbacks of bad trips, when you feel you are reliving them again

Mephedrone (do not confuse with methadone – see p.18)

Mephedrone is similar to amphetamines and also to the active ingredients of khat. It was made illegal in EU countries in 2010.

Type of drug	Stimulant
Short-term effects	 Agitation Hallucinations (hearing and seeing things and also strange touch sensations) Paranoid delusions (even if you are taking antipsychotic medication) Depression Suicidal feelings

Methadone

Heroin addiction is often treated with methadone or buprenorphine, which are both prescribed as heroin substitutes, endorsed by NICE (the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence).

Methadone has similar effects to heroin, but they are milder and longer lasting, so it stops you going through withdrawal, and doesn't give you the initial high.

Type of drug	Opium-related drug/depressant
Side effects	 Mood changes Hallucinations Restlessness

Nicotine

You would not normally experience mental health effects from using nicotine. However, it is extremely addictive, and if you stop having nicotine it can cause negative effects.

Type of drug	Stimulant
Dependence and withdrawal	Irritability
symptoms	 Restlessness
	 Depression

Phencyclidine (PCP)

PCP is an anaesthetic, mainly used in animals. It is similar to ketamine (see p.15). The symptoms you experience from taking PCP may be confused with schizophrenia.

Type of drug	Hallucinogen
Short-term effects	 Poor concentration Changed perception of surroundings – things not looking right or not feeling right Feeling out of touch with reality and with your surroundings Delusions Paranoia Dream-like states Nightmares Feeling you have no thoughts Feeling violent (associated with a bad trip) Feeling suicidal or wanting to self-harm (associated with a bad trip)
Long-term effects	DepressionLong-lasting psychosis
Dependence and withdrawal symptoms	Depression

Psilocybin/psilocyn (magic mushrooms)

The effects of magic mushrooms are similar to LSD (see p.16).

Type of drug	Hallucinogen
Short-term effects	 Hallucinations – these may be
	pleasant or frightening

Solvents

Solvents, glues, gases and aerosols are used mainly by a small percentage of young people, usually only for a short period.

Type of drug	Depressant
Short-term effects	 Feelings similar to getting drunk Dizziness Feeling unreal Euphoria Loss of inhibition Pseudo-hallucinations (hallucinations that you know are not real) Repeated sniffing can cause a hangover effect, making you pale, very tired, forgetful and unable to concentrate
Dependence	• Rare

Do psychiatric drugs and street drugs affect each other?

When two or more drugs are taken at the same time, they are likely to interact with one another, so that one drug changes the effects of the other. One or both of them may become toxic, or their effects may be decreased or increased. Your age, weight, genes, general health and liver or kidney function will make a difference to the way the drugs work. However, there are some common interactions that many people experience.

For example:

- MAOI (monoamine oxidase inhibitors) antidepressants phenelzine, isocarboxazid and tranylcypromine – interact with many substances to cause very dangerous effects. These include high blood pressure, chest pain, neck stiffness, rigid muscles, flushing, vomiting and severe headaches.
- The antidepressant moclobemide (a reversible MAOI) could interact with stimulants, causing effects which may be life-threatening.
- If the antipsychotic chlorpromazine is taken together with amphetamines, the effects of one or both can be reduced.
- The mood stabilisers lithium and carbamazepine may reduce the effects of cocaine.
- Lithium blocks the effects of amphetamines.
- At very high doses, ketamine reduces respiration rates. If ketamine is taken in combination with other sedatives, respiration rates will reduce more.
- Taking alcohol with most types of antidepressants and antipsychotics increases the sedative effects.

Other interactions may occur and it is very important to remember this. Don't be afraid to ask your doctor or pharmacist about any concerns you have. (See also Mind's booklets on medication in the *Making sense of...* series.)

What treatments are available?

If you are concerned that your drug use is affecting your mental health, you could go to see a GP, or you may be able to go straight to your local street drugs service. They can discuss any issues, explain your options for treatment and refer you to a specialist if necessary. If you want help to stop taking drugs, you could also contact a drugs organisation for information and support. (See 'Useful contacts' on p.28.)

While you may be anxious about discussing your use of street drugs with your doctor, your treatment is likely to be more successful if they have all the information about your drug use. It's therefore important to be honest about how you use drugs. For example, a doctor may be less likely to prescribe antipsychotic medication if they know that your psychosis may have been caused by a street drug. (See 'Medication' on p.23.)

Before you start any treatment, your doctor should discuss your options with you, and take your opinions into account.

NICE (the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence) has produced guidance on psychological treatments and social help for people with problems related to drug or alcohol abuse. They recommend that:

- all treatment should be person-centred and take into account your individual needs and preferences, as well as your cultural background and any special needs you may have
- you should have a good support worker to coordinate your care plan and build a good therapeutic relationship with you, discussing your options with you
- you should be offered 'motivational interviewing' and 'contingency management', which aim to encourage you to stop taking street drugs (see p.25)
- you should be offered a talking treatment if you are being treated for heroin addiction with methadone, buprenorphine or naltrexone.

Talking treatments

Depending on the effects on your mental health, you may be offered psychological therapies, such as cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT). If you and your partner both use street drugs, you may also be offered couples therapy. (See Mind's booklets *Making sense of cognitive behaviour therapy* and *Making sense of talking treatments*.)

Medication

Medication is unlikely to help with mental health problems that are directly caused by your use of alcohol or street drugs. For example, if you experience psychosis as the result of taking a street drug, antipsychotic drugs may not be effective. SSRI (selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors) antidepressants are not effective for treating depression caused by using ecstasy.

But if you already had a diagnosis of a mental health problem before you started using other substances, you may be prescribed drugs to treat it. If you are prescribed psychiatric drugs, it's important to be careful about taking them with street drugs. The different drugs may interact with each other and cause adverse effects. (See 'Do psychiatric drugs and street drugs affect each other?' on p.20.)

What support services are available?

If you have dual diagnosis, and experience both mental health problems and drug addiction (see 'Dual diagnosis' on p.6), there are a range of services available to help you.

Mental health and social services

When seeking help from mental health and social services, it's best to explain as much as you can about your circumstances. This means that they can make a full assessment of your needs, including social needs such as housing, employment and benefits, and refer you for help with these.

If you have severe mental health problems and problematic substance misuse, the Department of Health recommends that mental health services should be responsible for your treatment, rather than drug and alcohol services.

If you are referred to your Community Mental Health Team (CMHT), or Assertive Outreach Team (AOT), you may be allocated a care coordinator and have a written care plan under the Care Programme Approach (CPA). (See Mind's online booklet *The Mind guide to Community-based mental health and social care in England* for more information.)

Housing

One of the biggest problems for people with dual diagnosis is finding somewhere to live. Many housing agencies and supported housing trusts will not accept drug users. However, a number of housing associations and trusts have begun to provide suitable supported schemes. (See Mind's online booklet *The Mind guide to housing and mental health*.)

Self-help groups

You may find going to a self-help group useful. At a self-help group, you can talk about your mental health problems and drug use with other people who are having similar experiences. There are many organisations that run self-help groups, including some local Minds. (See 'Useful contacts' on p.28.)

Support in the criminal justice system

If you have been in contact with the criminal justice system in association with your use of drugs, this should not make any difference to the type of treatments you are offered. If you are in prison, you may be offered a 'therapeutic community', developed to help people with drug problems in a prison environment.

Drug and alcohol support services

You may be offered help from drug and alcohol support services to encourage you to stop taking drugs. This usually means you are allocated a support worker, and receive quite intensive one-to-one support.

The programmes recommended by NICE (the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence) are:

- Motivational interviewing The aim of this is to help you decide what
 to do about your drug use and to follow up the decisions you make.
 You may be offered one or two sessions.
- Contingency management Under contingency management, you
 may be offered incentives, such as shopping vouchers, to encourage
 you to stay off drugs. You will have to agree to urine or saliva testing
 as part of this.

How can friends and family help?

This section is for friends and family who want to help someone they know with a mental health problem who also uses street drugs or alcohol. It may also be useful for anyone concerned that a friend or family member is experiencing mental health problems as a result of taking street drugs.

If your friend or relative has mental health problems and also takes street drugs or alcohol, it can be very difficult to know how to help them. If they have severe problems, the reality may be that there is a limit to the amount of support you can give and how much you can get them to change. However, there are some things you can do that might be helpful.

Encourage them to seek appropriate help

If you are concerned that your friend or family member needs help, encourage them to seek appropriate treatment. This can be difficult, particularly if they are seeking help for the first time, as they may be worried about being judged for their drug use. They may also be concerned about what will happen if they have been using illegal drugs. You can reassure them that it is OK to seek help, and perhaps help them decide where they might go for support.

Support them to use services

Your friend or family member may need help to find out what services are available locally. You might also be able to help by supporting them to make the most of the services they are using. For example, you could go to meetings with their support workers and doctors, to help them provide the most suitable care. NICE (the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence) guidelines suggest that if you are involved in your friend's or relative's care in this way, they should be shown a copy of the record of the meetings and what you have said.

Encourage them to carry on with treatment

If they are taking part in a drug treatment programme or receiving a talking treatment, you may be able to encourage them to stick to their treatment plan, go to appointments or meet their targets.

Spend positive time with them

Let your friend or family member know you are there for them. Listen to them if they want to talk and spend time together, joining in with activities they enjoy.

Help in an emergency

If the person doesn't seek help, and you think they are putting themselves or others at risk, their 'nearest relative' (as defined under the Mental Health Act 1983, MHA) can ask for a mental health assessment to be carried out. Under the MHA, they can be compulsorily detained in hospital for further assessment and treatment if necessary. You may wish to discuss the consequences of taking this action with other family members first. (For more information, see Mind's booklets *Rights guide: Civil admission to hospital* and *The Mind guide to the Mental Health Act 1983*.)

Look after yourself

It can be very difficult to try and support someone whose problems are associated with their use of street drugs or alcohol. You may find it helpful to discuss your feelings and concerns with someone else, such as a counsellor, or to join a support group, such as those provided by your local Adfam or Families Anonymous. (See 'Useful contacts' on p.28.)

Useful contacts

Mind

Mind Infoline: 0300 123 3393 (Monday to Friday 9am to 6pm)

email: info@mind.org.uk

web: mind.org.uk

Details of local Minds and other local services, and Mind's Legal Advice Line. Language Line is available for talking in a language

other than English.

Addaction

tel: 020 7251 5860 web: addaction.org.uk Services for people who are dependent on drugs and alcohol, and their families.

Adfam

tel: 020 7553 7640 web: adfam.org.uk Support and information for family and friends of people with drug or

alcohol problems.

Alcoholics Anonymous

helpline: 0845 769 7555

web: alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk National network of local Alcoholics

Anonymous groups.

British Association for Behavioural and Cognitive Psychotherapies

(BABCP)

tel: 0161 705 4304 web: babcp.com

Provides details of accredited CBT

therapists.

Club Drug Clinic

advice line: 020 3315 6111 web: clubdrugclinic.cnwl.nhs.uk For people concerned about their use of recreational drugs.

Cocaine Anonymous UK

tel: 0800 612 0225 web: cauk.org.uk

Help for people who want to stop

using cocaine.

DrugScope

tel: 020 7234 9730 web: drugscope.org.uk

Information about street drugs.

Erowid

web: erowid.org

Information about psychoactive substances, including prescribed

drugs.

Families Anonymous

tel: 0845 1200 660 web: famanon.org.uk

Self-help groups for families and friends of people with a drug

problem.

Frank

helpline: 0300 123 6600 web: talktofrank.com

Information about street drugs, and

free 24-hour helpline.

Marijuana Anonymous

web: marijuana-anonymous.co.uk Help for people who want to stop

using cannabis.

Narcotics Anonymous

helpline: 0300 999 1212

web: ukna.org

Help for people who have problems

with street drugs.

National Institute for Health and

Care Excellence (NICE) tel: 0845 003 7780

web: nice.org.uk

Provides guidance on health and

social care.

Progress – National Consortium of Consultant Nurses in Dual Diagnosis and Substance Use web: dualdiagnosis.co.uk

Website for nurses which includes information for people with dual

diagnosis.

Public Health England

web: nta.nhs.uk

Information and support for people

addicted to drugs.

Turning Point

tel: 020 7481 7600

web: turning-point.co.uk Provides services for people with drug, alcohol and mental health

problems.

Further information

Mind offers a range of mental health information on:

- diagnoses
- treatments
- practical help for wellbeing
- mental health legislation
- where to get help

To read or print Mind's information booklets for free, visit mind.org.uk or contact Mind Infoline on 0300 123 3393 or at info@mind.org.uk

To buy copies of Mind's information booklets, visit mind.org.uk/shop or phone 0844 448 4448 or email publications@mind.org.uk

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Mind

We're Mind, the mental health charity for England and Wales. We believe no one should have to face a mental health problem alone. We're here for you. Today. Now. We're on your doorstep, on the end of a phone or online. Whether you're stressed, depressed or in crisis. We'll listen, give you advice, support and fight your corner. And we'll push for a better deal and respect for everyone experiencing a mental health problem.

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