If you care for someone with a mental health condition who is using alcohol or other drugs, you may have lots of questions or concerns.

What are the different Types of Drugs?

Drugs, including alcohol, can be divided into three broad categories according to their effects on the body. Some commonly used drugs and what people may call them are listed below:

- **STIMULANTS** - these include: caffeine, tobacco, amphetamines, such as speed, ecstasy (E or eccy), cocaine (code, snow), methamphetamine (ice). These drugs work by speeding up the activity of the Central Nervous System, such as breathing and heart rate, and/or leave the person feeling alert or excessively alert.

- **DEPRESSANTS** - these include: alcohol, tranquilisers (medications like Valium, Serepax & Xanax), opioids such as heroin (smack, gear, hammer), Methadone, cannabis (marijuana, dope, pot, ganja), inhalants (chroming, glue, petrol). These drugs work by dampening the activity of the Central Nervous System, usually leaving the person feeling slowed down or sedated.

- **HALLUCINOGENS** - these include: LSD (acid, trips) and magic mushrooms, cannabis and amphetamines can also have hallucinogenic effects in some people. These drugs affect the senses and distort a person’s perception, thinking and sense of reality. People who use hallucinogens may see, hear, taste, smell or feel things that are not real, which may leave the person feeling confused or frightened.

Why do people use drugs?

People use drugs for many reasons. These include curiosity, boredom, to feel relaxed, confident, energetic, to fit in with friends, to escape from their worries, to try and reduce distressing symptoms of a mental illness, or feelings such as guilt, anger or shame.

What is the Down Side to Using Drugs?

It is understandable that people with a mental illness may choose to use alcohol and other drugs with the hope or belief that it will help them feel better. Drug taking can sometimes produce sought after feelings, however these feelings are superficial and short lived. Using alcohol or other drugs can actually cause or worsen mental health symptoms. Using alcohol or other drugs can also:

- Undo the intended beneficial effects of medications
- Turn what may be a short-term illness into a chronic condition
- Hide problems/symptoms that return once the effects of the drug have worn off
- Cause physical health problems to bodily organs such as the brain, heart, lungs, liver and kidneys
- Result in risk taking; such as harm to self or others, aggression, violence, law breaking, accidents and unsafe sex
- Impact negatively on relationships, and may include neglect and/or abusive behaviour.

Will Everyone Have the Same Reaction to Drugs?

Many factors can influence the effect of drugs and alcohol on a person. The harm caused depends on:

- which drug or combination of drugs and/or alcohol are used
- the amount used and how they are taken
- frequency and duration of use
- at what age drug use began
- where they are used
- the individual characteristics of the person (such as weight, how tired they are, what they have eaten)
- a person’s mood and level of stress around the time of drug use.
Drugs may trigger mental health problems in people who have never experienced them previously, or make symptoms worse in people who already have a mental illness. Some people become dependent on drugs (addicted).

**What can family and friends do to help?**
Often it is a family member or carer who first notices someone’s alcohol or other drug problem. It can take some time for a person to realise that the negative effects of alcohol and other drugs outweigh the short-term feelings gained from using them. The family member or carer might encourage the person to speak to their doctor or care coordinator or to seek counselling. This will be difficult if the person does not acknowledge their drug use as a problem.

Some people may refuse to seek help or they may not succeed the first time(s) they try to stop or cut down their use. This can be a very frustrating period for family or friends who want the person to give themselves the best opportunity to recover and stay well. Caring for someone who is using substances can be like being on a roller coaster, experiencing the highs and lows and not knowing what lies around the corner. Family and friends can be left feeling stressed and it is important for them to have support during these times.

A person with a mental health condition and alcohol or other drug use problems (often referred to as ‘Dual Diagnosis’) may be helped by Mental Health and Drug Health Services working together to improve the quality of their care.

**How might I help someone who is using Drugs?**
There are some practical strategies that family and friends can use to assist someone who is affected by drugs or alcohol:

- Try not to blame anyone, including yourself.
- Be honest. Let the person know your concerns, but also be prepared to listen.
- Choose your moment, try to stay calm; it is difficult to talk to someone about their drug use when they are intoxicated or under the influence of other drugs, angry or upset. Pick a time when both they and you are calm and able to discuss the issue. Panicking or jumping to conclusions can make it harder to find out what’s really going on and make the person close up and refuse to talk openly about the issues.
- Be a role model. If your own alcohol or other drug use is problematic, you are unlikely to be effective in helping.
- Obtain informed advice from experienced health professionals.
- Remember no one has to put up with abusive, violent or dangerous behaviour. If this does occur or you think it is likely to occur, be mindful of your personal safety, talk to someone about the situation and seek assistance (eg: health worker, another family member or the police).

**Where to go for Information and Support**
The following is a list of some telephone and website support and information services that are freely available:

- Drug Health Services: 9616 8586 Monday - Friday, 8.30am - 4.30pm
- Alcohol & Drug Information Service (ADIS): 9361 8000; 1800 622 599 (Regional) 24 hours, 7 days a week
- Family Drug Support: 1300 368 186; 24 hours, 7 days a week - support and information (national)
- NSW Mental Health Line: 1800 011 511; 24 hours, 7 days a week - mental health crisis response, assessment, information and referrals
- Domestic Violence Helpline: 1800 656 463; 24 hours, 7 days a week - telephone counselling, information and referrals.

- National Drug & Alcohol Research Centre NDARC: www.ndarc.med.unsw.edu.au
- Reachout, for Young people: www.au.reachout.com
- Network of Alcohol & Drug Agencies (NADA): www.nada.org.au