

Substance Use Awareness Communications Toolkit

A guide to create a customized communications campaign for Indigenous communities and organizations.

Introduction

This toolkit was developed as a regional program resource by Indigenous Services Canada in Alberta for use by First Nations in Treaty 6, Treaty 7 and Treaty 8 as well as Métis communities in Alberta. One of the biggest barriers for those seeking substance use supports is the lack of culturally appropriate, non-stigmatizing, and accessible services. Indigenous people can experience additional barriers as a result of stigma, health inequities, and the ongoing impacts of colonization. Talking about substance use can also be difficult, but safe, compassionate and informed communication can help reduce stigma, connect people with supports and save lives.

Communities know best what communication activities and tools work for them. their members. This toolkit provides practical information and adaptable tools to help communities communicate about substance use, available supports, and harm reduction in ways that reflect their own needs and circumstances.

Who this toolkit is for:

This toolkit can be adapted by different people for different purposes. For example:

- **Communications teams** – plan a campaign and develop community specific materials
- **Programs or Organizations** – use the examples and resources to increase awareness of local programs and services

- **Health and wellness staff** – use the language and resources to support conversations with clients, families and community members
- **Leaders and spokespeople** – use it to talk about substance use and promote available supports

You do not have to use the entire toolkit. Start with the sections and tools that are most useful for your community.

Prevention is a large part of addressing substance-related harms and may already be happening in many ways within your community. Studies show that connection to community goes a long way in preventing substance use and related harms among youth and adults. Prevention activities can include after school programs, youth programming, community celebrations, recreation, and other activities that bring community members together and give people a sense of belonging.

The scope of this toolkit is focused on raising awareness of resources for people with lived and living experience of substance use, health professionals, families, and caregivers. For communication activities focused on prevention, see the [Canadian Drugs and Substances Strategy: Prevention and education – Canada.ca](#) or [Addiction Prevention Toolkit from Alberta Health Services](#).

Possible campaign goals:

- Increase awareness of available supports and resources in community
- Reduce stigma related to substance use
- Support safe and compassionate conversations about substance use
- Increase awareness of harm reduction and overdose prevention
- Increase awareness of and access to naloxone

The remainder of this toolkit can assist you in identifying your audience, developing messages and choosing communications approaches that support your community goals.

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Already well versed in creating communications campaigns? Get started quickly by skipping ahead to Key Messages and taking advantage of the customizable materials.

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Background

Before getting started on planning a campaign, you can review background information below about substance use, stigma, harm reduction and cultural safety. The information can also be used to develop communications products or shared in your communications campaign. Factsheets with background information that can be used as-is are included at the end of this toolkit in the annex section. Print or post them on social media.

Understanding opioid use disorder

How addiction changes the brain: Annex A

Substance use can involve alcohol, opioids, stimulants and other substances. Because of the significant harms associated with opioids and the toxic drug supply, opioid use disorder (OUD) is one important area of substance use awareness.

[Opioid use disorder](#) is also referred to as opioid addiction. It's a treatable medical condition that changes the brain and body in ways that make it hard to stop using opioids. This is because the body gets used to a regular supply of the drug.

A person with OUD may become dependent on opioids, making it difficult to stop using them even when they are experiencing harmful effects.

Substance use can affect people differently, and not everyone who uses opioids will develop OUD.

[Addiction 101](#) – Centre for Addiction and Mental Health

Substance use spectrum

[Substance use](#) is different for everyone. It can be viewed on a [spectrum](#), with varying levels of

Substance use spectrum
fact sheet: Annex B

benefits and harms. Some substance use can have negative impacts on someone's life and loved ones, but there are treatment options available to help them. A person does not need to have [substance use disorder](#) to ask for help. Substance use disorder is a chronic medical condition, and recurrence of substance use can be part of the recovery process.

No matter where someone is with their substance use, there are various options to help them move towards a healthier lifestyle. Health and social supports can include, medication, therapy and other services depending on the individual's needs and goals.

A good [treatment](#) plan could include medication, psychological supports, withdrawal management, peer support and approaches that reduce harm associated with substance use. Abstinence may be a goal for some people, while others may focus on reducing risk or using substances more safely. Support should reflect the individual's needs and goals. Recurrence of substance use can happen and does not mean that treatment or recovery has failed.

Stigma as a barrier

[Stigma](#) is negative attitudes, language, beliefs or behaviours about or towards a group of people because of their situation in life. It includes discrimination, prejudice, judgment and stereotypes, which can isolate people who use substances.

	People who use substances can face discrimination and barriers to getting help. Stigma can: · Lead a person to avoid getting help because they are afraid of judgement or getting in trouble at work, with their loved ones or even the law. · Cause a person to hide their substance use or use substances alone, which can increase the risk of a fatal overdose. · Affect a person's ability to find housing and jobs, which affects their health and quality of life. · Contribute to people who use substances receiving a lower quality of care from the healthcare system when they access services.
Non-stigmatizing language <u>Stigma – Why Words Matter</u> <u>Fact Sheet: Annex C</u>	The language you use has a direct and deep impact on people. We can reduce stigma by changing the words we use to talk about substance use. Using compassionate language can make it easier for someone to speak up, feel understood or receive help. Use person-first language, for example say 'person who uses substances' instead of 'drug user'. Don't use labels that define someone by their substance use. Use neutral, medically accurate words when describing substance use. When possible, ask people how they would like to be referred to and respect the language they use themselves.

Cultural safety	Cultural Safety is about creating an environment where people feel safe and respected when receiving care or support. It recognizes power imbalances, racism and discrimination within health systems. Experiences of racism, discrimination, stigma or culturally unsafe care create barriers to accessing health and support services. Culturally safe approaches recognize that people and communities are best positioned to identify what feels safe and respectful to them.
Harm reduction	Harm reduction is an evidence-based public health approach that aims to reduce the negative health, social and economic impacts of substance use without requiring or promoting abstinence. Harm reduction can reduce risks, improve health and connect people who use substances with health and social services. Indigenous approaches to harm reduction may also incorporate culture, community, relationships, traditional knowledge and the impacts of colonization. Approaches will vary across Nations and communities. For an example of one Indigenous approach to harm reduction, see the First Nations Health Authority's Harm reduction resources.

Planning your campaign

Research and connect

Research what substance use programs and resources are in your community.

Depending on your community, there may be a substance use or addictions worker, mental wellness program, wellness team, recovery centre or other health, social or cultural supports that could use your communications support. Substance use is complex, and no single program or service can meet every need. Connecting with programs and partners across your community can help ensure your campaign reflects the range of available supports. Reach out to the programs, learn what they provide, make a list and make them a part of your campaign.

The most important component of an effective substance use communications campaign is that it is customized to your community. Which means you, the community lead, will bring the most value by identifying local needs, resources and approaches.

Community experts can also help with customizing key messages.

Target audiences

Consider tailoring your messages for particular audiences. There may be groups within your community more affected by substance use. Youth might respond to messages about peer pressure or learning about healthy choices. There may be support groups for men or women, you can tailor messages highlighting those resources. People with mental health disorders may respond to messages that are inclusive.

While you may identify specific target audiences within your community, this campaign toolkit is tailored to address, people with lived and living experience, health professionals, families and caregivers.

Tailoring your messages to specific audiences in your community is more likely to reach and stick with them.

Message frequency & timing

The frequency of your message could affect the impact on people's behaviour. Generally, messages need to be repeated for people to recognize and then act on the message. Consider posting information more than once and with different variations on the theme of the message.

Consider the timing of the *campaign*. Your campaign may run all year but a more targeted and comprehensive campaign may be needed if the community is currently in crisis due to substance use. Consider timing of the *messages*. Messages can have a stronger impact when it is associated to an event or a limited period of time e.g. upcoming family holiday, cultural event or health fair. You can create a content calendar and plan in advance what you will be sharing on social media.

[Example Content Calendar: Annex D](#)

Spokespeople

A spokesperson for the message can bring your campaign to life and allow people to connect and trust what is being expressed. Nation or community leaders, Elders, or health staff such as doctors or nurses are examples of people who are often seen as trusted sources of information in communities.

Ultimately, your own community experience will help guide you as you decide how best to plan your campaign, but in addition to the message or information that needs to be shared, please keep in mind: the audience, the spokesperson, the message, timing and the delivery platform.

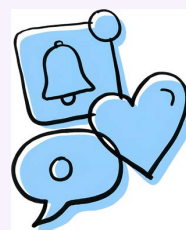
Distribution

Addressing different audiences

The following section highlights different communication tools that can be used to target different audiences and distribute your campaign materials.

Various methods of communication are going to be more effective for different target audiences. Identify who is most affected by substance use in your community and let them know what kind of resources are available to them. Different target audiences may include families, youth, adults, schools, parents, and adults over 65.

For example, social media channels such as Tik Tok and Instagram are very effective for younger age groups, whereas Facebook is more useful for reaching an older demographic.



When planning your campaign, consider the social media channel and messaging you decide to use to target certain age groups.

Your target audience may not be on social media and would benefit from other forms of distribution of campaign materials. Printing resources and distributing them to high traffic areas such as community centres, health centres, schools, during health fairs and other community events, may be more effective for these groups.



Key Messages

These are example key messages that can be tailored with help from your local community program experts and formatted into social media posts or other products for your campaign. Consider including an image or short video with your social media posts as those are more likely to get views.

When choosing your images to accompany your messages it is very important to avoid stigmatizing images as well as triggering ones. Some images depicting substance use or substance use equipment may be distressing or triggering for people with lived and living experience. Avoid images of people using substances, drugs or substance use equipment.

Use strong messages and words. The images are secondary and should be hopeful, positive images of people or places. You can access free images to create communications products through a [canva.com](https://www.canva.com) account.

There are some free stock photos available at: [istockphoto.com](https://www.istockphoto.com), [Indigenous stock images – CIRA](https://www.indigenousstockimages.com), [shutterstock.com](https://www.shutterstock.com), [Pexels](https://www.pexels.com), [Unsplash](https://unsplash.com), [Pixabay](https://pixabay.com) and [CC Search Portal \(creativecommons.org\)](https://creativecommons.org).

Example key messages

1

There are supports available for all people who use substances. Call the health centre to inquire what's right for you.

2

If you're looking to reduce or stop using substances, support is available. Call the health centre to ask about treatment and withdrawal management options.

3	If substance use is affecting your health or wellbeing, treatment and support are available. Call the health centre to inquire about options or treatment available to you.
4	If you use opioids or drugs that may contain opioids, carrying naloxone could save your life. Find out where naloxone is available in your community by calling the health centre.
5	Everyone deserves compassionate non-stigmatizing care related to substance use.
6	Recognize your biases and actively work to mitigate them. Create a stigma free environment and use destigmatizing language with your clients.
7	You can save a loved one's life by carrying naloxone and learning how to use it. Find out where naloxone is available in your community by calling the health centre.
8	Carrying naloxone can save a life. It is not the same as encouraging opioid or substance use but makes sure we are taking care of the most in need members of our communities.
9	If you are affected by someone's substance use, there is support available. Hope For Wellness is a 24/7 hotline for Indigenous people seeking emotional support, crisis intervention or referral to community-based services.

[Example of campaign planning: Annex E](#)

Developing your materials

Now that you have identified your audience, you can start to develop your products by using the background information, key messages and additional resources below and consulting your community experts. Software such as Canva.com can be a great tool to use with a free or paid account. Below are some pre-developed products that you could use and customize by editing the message, adding your community logo, adding a phone number, etc.

Pre-developed Customizable Materials

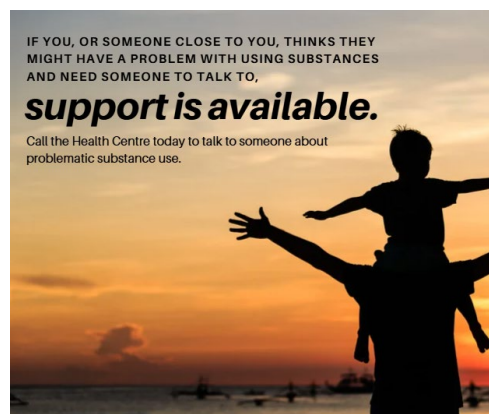
To customize the social media resources for your community, create a free Canva account and follow the below instructions:

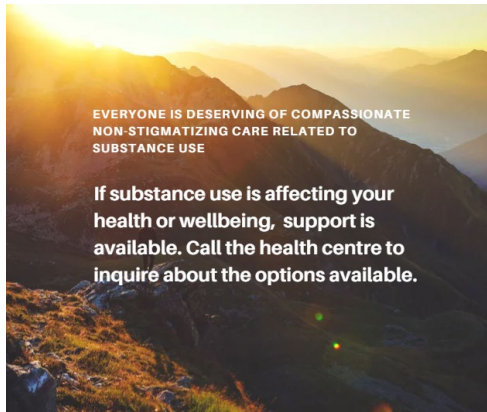
Open link. Select 'File' and click 'Make a copy'.

Customize the resource with your community's branding or any additional information that may be needed.

Once complete select 'Share' and click 'Download'

- Social Media Posts & Poster





**THERE ARE RESOURCES
AVAILABLE**

WONDERING IF YOU NEED HELP?
IF YOU ARE UNSURE IF YOU NEED HELP WITH
YOUR SUBSTANCE USE, YOU CAN CONNECT WITH A
SUPPORT WORKER OR CALL X FOR ADVICE. IT'S
OK TO ASK FOR HELP.

**ARE YOU WORRIED ABOUT A LOVED
ONE'S SUBSTANCE USE?**
IF YOU ARE AFFECTED BY SOMEONE'S
SUBSTANCE USE, THERE IS SUPPORT AVAILABLE.
CALL X OR VISIT X TO LEARN WHAT YOU CAN DO
TO TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF AND YOUR LOVED
ONES.

**ARE YOU LOOKING TO REDUCE OR
STOP USING SUBSTANCES?**
SUPPORT IS AVAILABLE. CALL THE HEALTH
CENTRE TO ASK ABOUT TREATMENT AND
WITHDRAWAL MANAGEMENT OPTIONS.

DO YOU NEED SOMEONE TO TALK TO?
NO MATTER WHERE YOU ARE IN YOUR JOURNEY
TO A LIFE-FREE OF PROBLEMS FROM SUBSTANCE
USE, THERE ARE RESOURCES AVAILABLE FOR YOU.
CALL X IF YOU HAVE QUESTIONS ON THE NEXT
STEPS IN YOUR JOURNEY.

Strengthening your campaign

You can supplement your campaign by sharing reliable information from trusted sources.

Leadership	Government Officials
Sharing community leadership messages on official community social media accounts can broaden the reach and increase the level of trust in the messaging.	Sharing new or existing information and resources for substance use from official government pages can increase access to these resources.



Blood Tribe Communications - Tsinikssini
4 days ago · 🌐

Blood Tribe Harm Reduction Project International Overdose Awareness Walk 2024
-Tara ManyFingers, published on September 4, 2024 by Blood Tribe Communications and Community Engagement

Blood Tribe Community members and partners gathered to walk through Standoff townsite on August 31, 2024, to raise awareness with the Blood Tribe Harm Reduction Project for International Overdose Awareness Day (IOAD). ... See more



[Blood Tribe Communications](#)



Healthy Canadians ✓
March 9, 2022 · 🌐

Fear of stigma and judgement can make it harder to talk about substance use and reach out for help. #Addiction is not a choice, it is a treatable medical condition.

Help #EndStigma by showing compassion and support to people around you.

Learn more: <http://ow.ly/KYOJ50lc3wm>



[Healthy Canadians](#)

Health Organizations

There are organizations regularly posting about substance use and the opioid crisis.

The content can easily be shared with a customizable caption.



[Healthy First Nations and Inuit](#)

Ideas to promote available resources in community

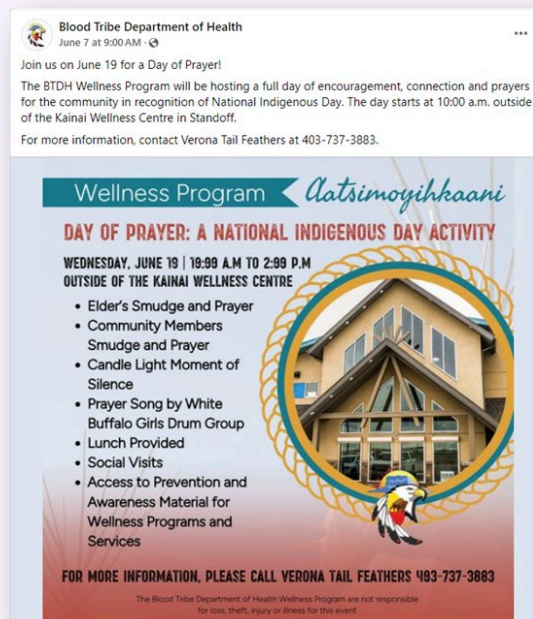
At this point in planning your campaign, you may already have a target audience and a distribution plan and developed key messages with community programs to target that audience. This section highlights additional ideas to strengthen your campaign.

Local campaigns:

Consider promoting substance use resources at local health and wellness events in your community.

The Indigenous Services Canada Alberta Region Communications Team can support the development of communications materials that can be customized for communities. ISC Alberta Region Medical Officers of Health may also be available to support education and awareness activities, including as subject-matter experts or spokespeople.

To the right, please find an example of a social media poster in support of a local health event in 2023.



Cross promotion

Cross promote resources at social gathering events such as: powwows, celebrations, round dances, health fairs, vaccination clinics, etc. Physicians, nurses and other health care professionals should advise patients of their available resources to people who use substances.

Identify ambassadors

Engage with community leadership, prominent community members or people with lived and living experience of substance use and ask them to be ambassadors for substance use awareness by sharing their message on social media.

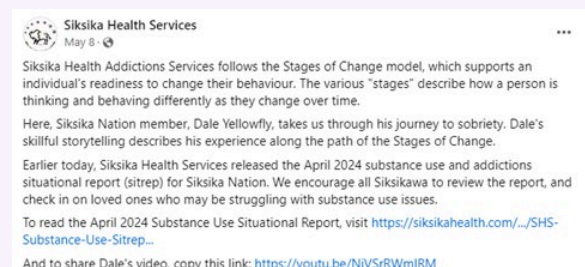
Share personal stories

Identify people with lived and living experience of substance use who are comfortable sharing their experiences. They could speak about how substance use has affected them and their families, accessing support, reducing harm, treatment or recovery. This could be a short note with a photo or a short video shared on social media. Please see some real community examples below.

[Tsuut'ina Healthy Living Program - Let's create real change](#)



[Siksika Health Services - May 8, 2024](#)



[Suboxone Stories - Part 1 \(fnha.ca\)](#)

Two clients share their early journeys with Opioid Replacement Therapy



Dwayne says he woke up one day and realized he couldn't do it anymore. After years of taking a prescription opioid to manage chronic pain caused by severe arthritis and foot surgery, he was ready to stop.

"You get to the point where you're constantly focused on the next dose," he says. "You are a slave to it and you realize you're living in a fog. It all got to be too much."

[Samson Community Wellness N.N.A.D.A.P.](#)

Nnadap Scw Nnadap
Admin · May 31 · 🌐

Brenda has be an inspiration and she has shared her story with her supporters ❤️
She came to Samson Community Wellness 2023
for the Kiwesi Women's camp (NNADAP) ❤️
all The best to her ❤️



YOUTUBE.COM
Brenda's Story

[Felonies To Recovery](#)



Resources

Communicating about substance use

Thunderbird Partnership Foundation	Opioids 101: Information you can use – Thunderbird (thunderbirdpf.org) Harm Reduction Resources – Thunderbird Podcast Mino Bimaadiziwin – Conversations on Addictions and Mental Wellness – Thunderbird
Northern Inter-Tribal Health Authority	Program Resources – NITHA Northern Inter-Tribal Health Authority
Weeneebayko Area Health Authority	Healing for One, Healing for All – Weeneebayko Area Health Authority
First Nations Health Authority	Indigenous Harm Reduction (fnha.ca) With Open Arms: Supportive conversations among friends
Government of Canada	Awareness resources for opioids – Canada.ca Talking to Your Health Care Provider About Opioids (fact sheet) – Canada.ca Stigma Gallery – Health Canada Experiences Stigma: Why Words Matter (fact sheet) – Canada.ca

	Changing the Stigmatizing Language of Addiction (video) – Health Canada Experiences Communicating about Substance Use in Compassionate, Safe and Non-Stigmatizing Ways Ease the burden of substance use and addiction – Canada.ca
CATIE & Ontario	Anti-Stigma Toolkit Communication resources for health providers working with people who use drugs
Centre for Addiction and Mental Health	Guides & Publications CAMH
Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction	Publications Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction (ccsa.ca)
Alberta Health Services	Addiction Prevention Toolkit How To Respond To An Opioid Poisoning With Naloxone (Naloxone Kit Instruction Insert) Substance use: Learning about how to give naloxone if you think someone has opioid poisoning

General Substance Use Resources

Government of Canada	Substance use treatment centres for First Nations and Inuit (sac-isc.gc.ca)
Government of Alberta	Opioid response – Options for care Alberta.ca
Alberta Health Services	Opioids Alberta Health Services
Canadian Mental Health Association Edmonton	211 People with Addiction Resources List
Alberta Addiction Service Providers	Alberta Addiction Service Providers – Resources
Alberta Referral Directory	Alberta Referral Directory
Thunderbird Partnership Foundation	Treatment Centre Statuses

References

The following sources informed the content within this toolkit.

National / Federal

Government of Canada (Canada.ca) <https://www.canada.ca>

Indigenous Services Canada <https://www.sac-isc.gc.ca>

Health Canada <https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada.html>

Healthy Canadians <https://www.healthycanadians.gc.ca>

Provincial (Alberta)

Government of Alberta <https://www.alberta.ca>

Alberta Health Services (AHS) <https://www.albertahealthservices.ca>

Indigenous Organizations

Thunderbird Partnership Foundation <https://www.thunderbirdpf.org>

Honouring Our Strengths <https://thunderbirdpf.org/honouring-our-strengths/>

First Nations Health Authority (FNHA) <https://www.fnha.ca>

Northern Inter-Tribal Health Authority (NITHA) <https://www.nitha.com>

Research & National Health Organizations

Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) <https://www.camh.ca>

Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction (CCSA) <https://www.ccsa.ca>

Community / Regional Supports

Canadian Mental Health Association – Edmonton <https://edmonton.cmha.ca>

Alberta Addiction Service Providers <https://albertaaddictionproviders.org>

Alberta Referral Directory <https://www.ab.211.ca>

Northreach Society (Grande Prairie) <https://northreach.ca>

HCS Media Backgrounder: How Addiction Changes the Brain

BACKGROUND: HOW ADDICTION CHANGES THE BRAIN

The brain consists of billions of cells, called neurons, which are organized into circuits and networks. Each neuron acts as a switch controlling the flow of information. Opioids and other drugs interfere with the way neurons send, receive, and process signals via the brain's neurotransmitters, leading to abnormal messages being sent through the network.

How does this happen? Our brains are wired to increase the odds that we will repeat pleasurable activities. The neurotransmitter dopamine is central to this. Whenever the reward circuit is activated by a healthy, pleasurable experience, a burst of dopamine signals that something important is happening that needs to be remembered. This dopamine signal causes changes in neural connectivity that make it easier to repeat the activity again and again without thinking about it, leading to the formation of habits. Once the brain feels the rewarding euphoria from opioids, large surges of dopamine are released—"teaching" the brain to seek drugs at the expense of other healthier goals and activities.

This is why a person who misuses drugs eventually feels flat, without motivation, lifeless, and/or depressed and is unable to enjoy things that were previously pleasurable. Now, the person needs to keep taking drugs to experience even a normal level of reward—which only makes the problem worse, like a vicious cycle. Also, the person will often need to take larger amounts of the drug to produce the familiar high—an effect known as tolerance. This brief [video](#) explains why drugs are so hard to quit (the link also offers a readable transcript.)

UNDERSTANDING KEY BRAIN CIRCUITS

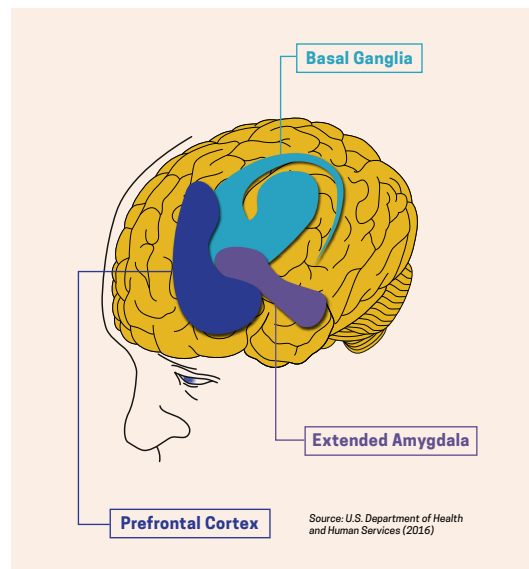
Drugs can alter important brain networks that are necessary for life-sustaining functions and can drive the compulsive drug use that marks addiction.

There are three parts of the brain that play a special role in this process.

Reward circuit: The **basal ganglia** play an important role in motivation, including the pleasurable effects of healthy activities like eating, socializing, and sex. They are a key part of what we call the brain's "reward circuit." Opioids and other drugs over-activate this circuit, producing the euphoria. With repeated exposure, the circuit adapts to the presence of the drug, making it hard to feel pleasure from anything else.

Stress Circuit: The **extended amygdala** plays a role in stressful feelings like anxiety, irritability, and unease, which characterize withdrawal after the drug high fades. Over time, a person with an opioid use disorder uses drugs primarily to get temporary relief from this discomfort and not necessarily to get high.

Impulse Control Circuit: The **prefrontal cortex** powers the ability to think, plan, solve problems, make decisions, and exert self-control over impulses. Shifting balance between this circuit and the reward and stress circuits make a person with an opioid use disorder seek the drug compulsively with reduced impulse control. This is also the last part of the brain to mature, making teens most vulnerable to addiction.



REFERENCES

National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA). (2020, July 20). *Preface: Drugs, brains and behavior: The science of addiction*. Retrieved from <https://www.drugabuse.gov/publications/drugs-brains-behavior-science-addiction/preface>

NIDA. (2013). Why drugs are so hard to quit [Video]. Retrieved from <https://www.drugabuse.gov/videos/why-are-drugs-so-hard-to-quit>

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), Office of the Surgeon General. (2016, November). *Facing addiction in America: The Surgeon General's report on alcohol, drugs, and health*. Washington, DC: HHS. Retrieved from <https://addiction.surgeongeneral.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-generals-report.pdf>

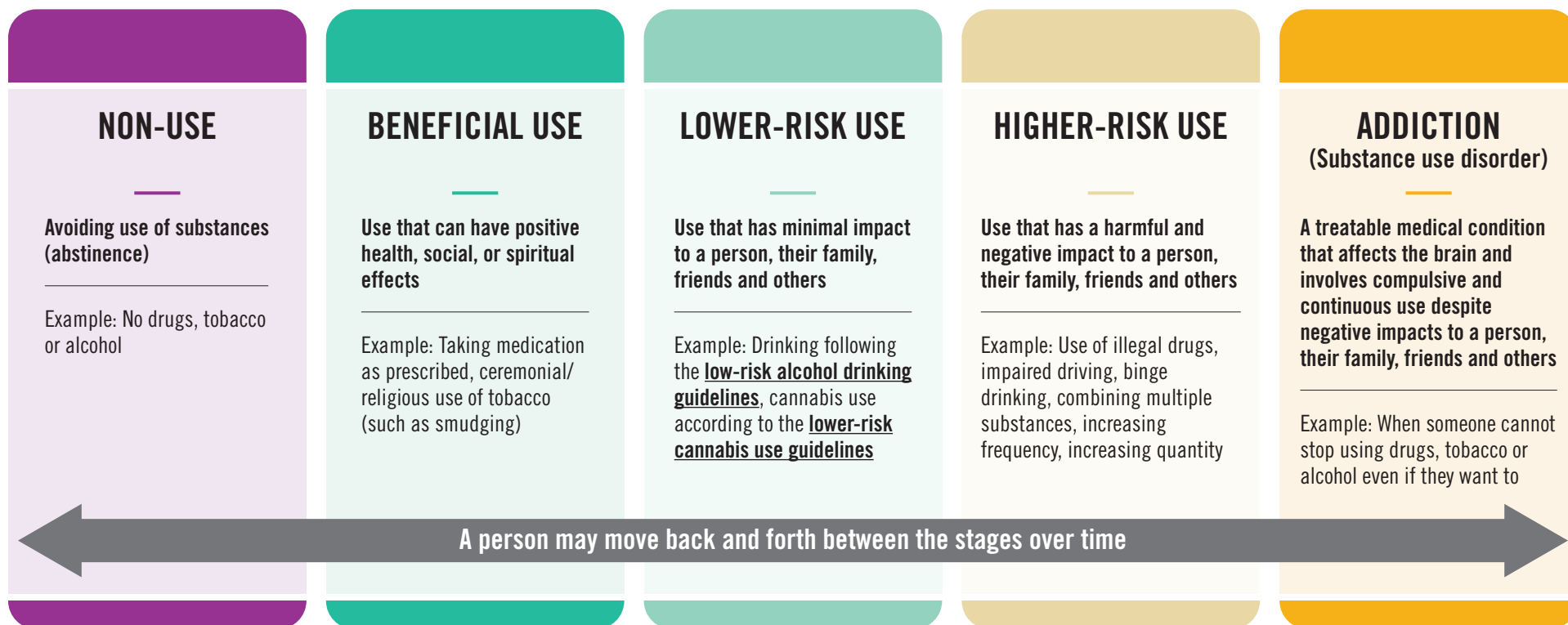
Media contact for questions about materials from the National Institute on Drug Abuse:
<https://www.drugabuse.gov/news-events/contact-press-office>

Media contact for the Healing Communities site:

SUBSTANCE USE SPECTRUM

People use substances, such as **controlled and illegal drugs**, **cannabis**, **tobacco/nicotine** and **alcohol** for different reasons, including medical purposes; religious or ceremonial purposes; personal enjoyment; or to cope with stress, trauma or pain.

Substance use is different for everyone and can be viewed on a spectrum with varying stages of benefits and harms.



NOTES

- Drugs, tobacco and alcohol have different effects on a person depending on factors like the substance(s) being used, tolerance, sex, age, weight, and any underlying health conditions, among other factors.
- The best way to avoid any harms from substance use is to avoid use. However, many people use substances without causing significant harm to themselves or others. In some cases, substances have a serious risk of harm at any level of use.
- Children and young adults are especially vulnerable to the effects of different substances because of the impacts on their development. In some cases, there may be no level of beneficial use or lower-risk use.
- The path to recovery from addiction is possible but it looks different for everyone. Some people may benefit from non-use (abstinence), whereas others may need different support, which could include medication, counselling, withdrawal management, and wrap-around services, such as employment and housing to support longer-term wellness.
- **Resources** are available to help people struggling with substance use. With the right supports, it is possible for a person to improve their health across the spectrum.

STIGMA

WHY WORDS MATTER

ABOUT STIGMA

Stigma is negative attitudes, beliefs or behaviours about or towards a group of people because of their situation in life. It includes discrimination, prejudice, judgment and stereotypes, which can isolate people who use drugs.

Stigma matters

People who use drugs, especially those struggling with addiction face discrimination and barriers to getting help.

Stigma can:

- lead a person to avoid getting help because they are afraid of judgement or getting in trouble with work, their loved ones or even the law
- cause a person to hide their drug use or use drugs alone
- affect a person’s ability to find housing and jobs, which affects their health and quality of life
- contribute to people who use drugs receiving a lower quality of care from the healthcare system when they access services

Changing how you talk about drug use

The language you use has a direct and deep impact on people around you. You can reduce stigma by changing the words you use to talk about drug use. Using kind words can make it easier for someone to speak up, to feel understood or to receive help.

- Use person-first language, for example say ‘person who uses drugs’ instead of ‘drug user’
- Use neutral, medically accurate words when describing drug use.

Topic	Instead of	Use
<i>People who use drugs</i>	• Addicts • Junkies • Users • Drug/substance abusers • Recreational drug users	• People who use drugs/substances • People with an addiction or substance use disorder • People with lived/living experience • People who occasionally use drugs
<i>People who have used drugs</i>	• Former drug addict • Referring to a person as being ‘clean’	• People who have used drugs/substances • People in recovery • People with lived/living experience
<i>Drug use</i>	• Drug/substance abuse • Drug/substance misuse • Problematic drug/substance use	• Drug/substance use • Addiction/substance use disorder • Drug dependence • Higher-risk drug/substance use • Substance use harms

STIGMA

WHY WORDS MATTER

There are **three** types of stigma

- 1 **Self stigma** happens when someone internalizes messages about people who use drugs and apply them to themselves
- 2 **Social stigma** is negative attitudes or behaviours towards people who use drugs or towards their friends and family
- 3 **Structural stigma** is policies in health and social services that increase stigma and barriers to getting help

Help end stigma

Take these important steps to help reduce stigma:

- ✓ do not define any person by their drug use
- ✓ be respectful, compassionate and caring to those who use drugs
- ✓ educate your friends and family—pass on facts and challenge stereotypes
- ✓ remember that addiction is a treatable medical condition, not a choice, and is deserving of care just like any other medical condition
- ✓ be aware of your attitudes and behaviours because they may be influenced by stereotypes, negative stories and images about people who use drugs



This document was created in discussion with people with lived and living experience, through existing research and documentation from other organizations trying to address stigma. This is not an exhaustive list. As discussions evolve around the best language to accurately describe substance use, this list may be revised.

For more information visit Canada.ca/opioids

Annex D

Example of Campaign Planning: Substance Use Communications Campaign – September to November 2024

Audience	Platform	Goals	Key Messages
People with lived experience	Facebook, TikTok, Radio, Event, Gathering Place Newsletter	• Increase awareness of available supports • Decrease stigma • Increase use/awareness of naloxone	• There are supports available for all people that use substances. • If you're looking to stop using drugs, detox is available. • If you are suffering from addiction or problematic substance use, treatment is available. • If you're using drugs, naloxone is important to have and could save your life. • If you think you might have a problem with using substances and need someone to talk to, support is available.
Health Professionals	Facebook, Health Centre, Radio, Email	• Increase referral • Decrease stigma	• Recognize your biases and actively work to mitigate them. • Create a stigma free environment. • Use destigmatizing language. • There are supports for all people that use drugs, learn what's available and provide referrals. • Everyone is deserving of care for problematic substance use just like any other medical condition.
Family/Caregivers	Facebook, TikTok, Radio, Posters, Newsletter	• Increase awareness of available supports • Decrease stigma • Increase use/awareness of naloxone	• There are supports available for all people that use substances. • Problematic substance use is a treatable medical condition and not a choice. • Everyone is deserving of care for problematic substance use just like any other medical condition. • You can save a loved one's life by carrying naloxone and learning how to use it. • If you are affected by someone's substance use, there is support available. • If someone you know is looking to stop using drugs, detox is available. • If someone you know is suffering from problematic substance use, treatment is available. • If someone you know is using drugs, naloxone is important to have and could save your life. • If someone you know might have a problem with using substances and need someone to talk to, support is available.

COMMUNICATIONS CONTENT CALENDAR

January
2025

Content Type

- Public Service Announcement
- Social Media Post
- Video
- Email
- Newsletter
- Infographic
- Posters
- Interview

Platforms

Facebook

Radio

TikTok

Gathering Place

Event

Newsletter

SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
31	01 PSA with available resources Posters – Health Fair – available resources	02	03 Social Media Post – Treatment is available	04	05	06
07	08 Interview – community member with lived experience	09	10	11 Social Media – repost interview TikTok on Facebook	12 Newsletter – Naloxone promotion	13
14 Social Media – Substance use supports for loved ones	15	16 Posters – Health centres – Biases and stigma	17	18	19 Social Media – Naloxone promotion	20
21	22 PSA – support for loved ones	23	24	25 Social Media – Available resources	26	27
28	29	30 Interview – Lived experience	31	01	02	03