

HOUSING AND WELLNESS PROGRAM

# A Comprehensive Wellness Guide for **First Nations Youth**

## **SUBSTANCE ABUSE**



First Nations Housing  
Professionals Association

L'Association des professionnels de  
l'habitation des Premières Nations



## Youth

Youth play an important role in shaping the strength and future of their communities. Supporting the wellness of youth living on-reserve helps build vibrant, healthy communities where young people can grow and thrive.

This wellness guide is designed to support First Nations youth by providing information, tools, and strategies that promote physical, mental, and emotional well-being.

By supporting youth wellness, communities can create environments that encourage resilience, positive development, and strong connections between generations.

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## Acknowledgement

The **First Nations Housing Professionals Association (FNHPA)** is delighted to introduce the Housing and Wellness Program, aimed at offering crucial information and guidance to First Nations individuals residing on-reserve or engaged in housing-related roles. This initiative delivers educational programs, tools, and resources tailored for First Nations housing staff, residents, and youth. Through the implementation of this program, our aim is to address housing, health, and safety concerns holistically.

# SUBSTANCE ABUSE

Substance abuse refers to the harmful or unsafe use of substances such as alcohol, prescription medications, or other drugs. Substance use can affect a person's physical health, mental well-being, relationships, and future opportunities. In many First Nations communities, substance abuse is connected to complex social and historical factors, including the lasting impacts of colonization, cultural disruption, and intergenerational trauma.

Learning about substance use and its impacts can help youth make informed choices and support healthier communities.

## Why It Matters for Youth

### Protecting your health and well-being

Substance use can affect both physical and mental health. Understanding the risks can help you make decisions that support your well-being.

### Understanding your history

Learning about the historical and social factors that have impacted First Nations communities can help youth understand the root causes of some challenges and support healing and resilience.

### Breaking generational cycles

By learning about substance use and its impacts, youth can make choices that help break harmful cycles and support healthier futures for themselves and their families.

### Supporting your community

Substance abuse can affect families, friendships, and communities. Learning about prevention and support can help youth contribute to healthier and safer communities.

### Empowering yourself

Knowledge helps youth make informed choices, set boundaries, and advocate for their own well-being.

## How Substance Use Can Affect Health

Substance use can impact many parts of a person's life, including their physical health, mental well-being, relationships, and safety.

### Physical Health

Substance use can affect the body in many ways, including:

- Damage to important organs such as the liver, heart, and brain
- Increased risk of chronic illnesses and infections
- Weakened immune system, making it harder for the body to fight illness

### Mental Health

Substance use can also affect a person's mental and emotional well-being. It may:

- Increase feelings of anxiety, depression, or mood changes
- Affect memory, concentration, and decision-making
- Lead to confusion, hallucinations, or other serious mental health concerns with some substances

### Relationships and Social Well-Being

Substance use can affect relationships with family, friends, and community members. It may lead to:

- Conflict or breakdown in communication
- Social isolation or withdrawal from activities
- Financial stress, legal issues, or difficulty maintaining school or work responsibilities

### Risk of Overdose

Using substances in large amounts or mixing different substances can increase the risk of overdose.

Overdoses can cause serious health complications and can sometimes be fatal, which is why it is important to understand the risks and seek help when needed.

## Risk Factors

Several factors can increase the risk of substance abuse. These factors can vary for each person and are often connected to life experiences, environment, and mental well-being.

### Family history

A family history of substance use can increase the risk of developing similar challenges. Being aware of this risk can help individuals make informed choices.

### Environment and peer influence

The people you spend time with and the environments you are in can influence your decisions. Surrounding yourself with supportive friends who respect your boundaries can make a positive difference.

### Trauma and intergenerational trauma

Experiences such as difficult life events, abuse, or loss can increase the risk of substance use as a way of coping. In some communities, trauma may also be connected to historical experiences that continue to affect families across generations.

### Mental health challenges

Conditions such as anxiety, depression, or other mental health concerns can sometimes lead individuals to use substances as a way to cope with difficult emotions.

### Stress and life pressures

School, work, relationships, and personal responsibilities can sometimes feel overwhelming. Without healthy coping strategies, stress can increase the risk of substance use.

### Early exposure to substances

Experimenting with alcohol or drugs at a young age can increase the likelihood of developing substance use problems later in life.

### Media and social influences

Media, entertainment, and social media may sometimes portray substance use in a positive or glamorous way. Understanding that these portrayals do not reflect the real risks can help youth make healthier choices.





## SUBSTANCE ABUSE INDICATORS

Substance abuse can affect people in different ways. Sometimes there are signs that someone may be struggling with substance use. Recognizing these signs can help youth support themselves or others by seeking help when needed.

### Changes in behaviour

Sudden changes in behaviour, such as secrecy, withdrawal from family or friends, or acting unusually aggressive or impulsive.

### Decline in school or work performance

A noticeable drop in grades, difficulty concentrating, or missing school or responsibilities more often.

### Mood changes

Frequent mood swings, irritability, anxiety, depression, or emotional outbursts.

### Changes in physical appearance

Unusual tiredness, changes in personal hygiene, or sudden weight changes.

### Loss of interest in activities

Losing interest in hobbies, sports, or activities that were once enjoyable.

### Risky or unsafe behaviours

Engaging in dangerous activities, making poor decisions, or taking risks that could harm themselves or others.

### Secretive or isolating behaviour

Spending more time alone, hiding activities, or avoiding conversations about certain behaviours.

# PREVENTION & HARM REDUCTION

## Substance Abuse Prevention

Preventing substance abuse involves building healthy habits, developing strong support systems, and making informed choices. Learning about prevention strategies can help youth protect their well-being and support healthier communities.

### Prevention Strategies

#### Education and Awareness

Learning about the risks and impacts of substance use can help youth make informed decisions and recognize unhealthy situations.

#### Develop healthy coping skills

Finding healthy ways to manage stress such as physical activity, creative outlets, cultural practices, or talking with trusted people can reduce the likelihood of turning to substances.

#### Build strong support networks

Supportive relationships with family members, friends, mentors, and community members can provide guidance and encouragement during difficult times.

#### Strengthen cultural connections

Connecting with culture, traditions, language, and community can help youth develop a strong sense of identity and belonging.

#### Set personal goals

Setting goals for education, careers, or personal growth can help youth stay focused on their future and make decisions that support their well-being.

#### Develop refusal skills

Learning how to confidently say no and set boundaries can help youth resist peer pressure and make choices that align with their values.

#### Access support services

Community programs, counseling services, and youth support organizations can provide guidance and assistance when needed.

## Harm Reduction

Harm reduction means taking steps to reduce the risks and harms that can come with substance use. It focuses on safety, support, and access to helpful information and services.

Harm reduction does not encourage substance use. Instead, it helps people stay safer, prevent serious harm, and access support when needed.

### Harm Reduction Strategies

#### Peer support

Support from trusted peers can make a difference. Safe spaces, youth groups, or support networks can help youth share information, encouragement, and resources.

#### Access to harm reduction services

Some communities offer harm reduction services that provide education, supplies, and support to help reduce the risk of overdose and other risks related to substance use.

#### Naloxone and overdose prevention

Naloxone, also called Narcan, is a medication that can reverse an opioid overdose. Learning the signs of overdose and knowing how naloxone works can help save lives.

#### Stigma reduction

Reducing stigma means treating people with respect and understanding. When people feel supported instead of judged, they may be more likely to seek help.

#### Access to treatment and support

Counseling, support groups, treatment programs, and community health services can help people who are struggling with substance use.

#### Early intervention

Screening, check-ins, and early support can help identify concerns before substance use becomes more serious.

#### Education and outreach

Learning safer practices, such as avoiding mixing substances and recognizing signs of overdose, can help reduce harm and improve safety.

## Coping Skills and Stress Management Techniques

Dealing with stress, pressure, or difficult emotions can be challenging. Developing healthy coping skills can help youth manage stress and make positive choices.

Here are some strategies that can support emotional well-being:

### Seek support when needed

Talking to a trusted adult, counselor, mentor, or support group can provide guidance and help you navigate difficult situations.

### Build a support network

Surround yourself with supportive friends, family members, or community members who encourage healthy choices and offer support during challenging times.

### Practice mindfulness

Techniques such as deep breathing, meditation, or quiet reflection can help calm the mind and reduce stress.

### Stay active

Physical activity such as walking, sports, swimming, or yoga can help improve mood and reduce stress.

### Explore healthy activities

Hobbies such as art, music, gardening, or cooking can provide positive outlets for stress and help you focus on activities you enjoy.

### Practice self-care

Taking care of your physical and emotional well-being such as getting enough sleep, eating balanced meals, and taking time to relax can help support overall wellness.

### Set realistic goals

Setting small, achievable goals and celebrating progress can help build confidence and motivation.

### Recognize triggers

Understanding situations or pressures that may lead to unhealthy choices can help you develop strategies to manage them.

### Stay connected

Maintaining strong connections with supportive people in your life can help you feel encouraged and less alone.

### Be patient with yourself

Everyone faces challenges. Learning new coping skills takes time, and showing yourself kindness and patience is an important part of personal growth.





## TRAUMA & HEALING

Understanding trauma can help explain why some people turn to substances as a way to cope with difficult experiences. Trauma can come from many different situations, such as loss, violence, family challenges, or other stressful life events.

Everyone responds to trauma differently, and some people may use substances in an attempt to manage difficult emotions or memories. While this may provide temporary relief, it can also create additional challenges over time.

### How Trauma Can Be Connected to Substance Use

#### Coping with difficult emotions

Some individuals may use substances to try to manage feelings such as sadness or anger.

#### Avoiding painful memories

Substances may sometimes be used to numb or escape from painful memories or emotions.

#### Feeling isolated or vulnerable

Trauma can sometimes make people feel disconnected from others, this may increase vulnerability to risky behaviors or substance use.

#### Negative cycles

Substance use may temporarily reduce emotional distress, but it can also lead to new challenges such as relationship difficulties, health concerns, or worsening mental health.

#### Healing and support

Healing from trauma is possible, and support is available. Talking with trusted adults, counselors, Elders, mentors, or community support workers can help individuals process their experiences and develop healthier coping strategies.

Building strong connections with culture, community, and supportive relationships can also play an important role in healing and resilience.



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## SUBSTANCE ABUSE

### Putting Healthy Choices into Practice

Understanding the impacts of substance use can help youth make informed decisions that support their health and well-being. By learning about risk factors, building healthy coping strategies, and surrounding yourself with supportive people, you can make choices that reflect your values and goals.

Remember that challenges and pressures are a normal part of life, and help is always available. Making thoughtful choices today can support a healthier future for yourself, your family, and your community.

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