

# Talking about substances at universities

**Intervening in substance use can be difficult because it is often seen as a private matter. However, regular heavy substance use does decrease the ability to study and work and does also have an impact on others. If you become worried about a student's coping, do not hesitate to broach the subject. You do not have to be a professional – anyone can bring up substance use.**

## How to bring up substances?



## 1 Start early and prepare in advance

### Trust your instinct and don't wait

Substance abuse issues are not always visible to the outside and often there is no individual sign. Trust your instinct, if you feel a student is not doing well. The earlier the intervention, the better the chance of having an impact. So, don't wait.

### What if I am wrong

Intervening in a possible substance abuse issue might feel difficult, but consider for a moment the worst it could cause. You are likely to be less annoyed about broaching the subject than the other way around.

### Find out where to get help

If you can, consider in advance what you want to say. Also, find out in advance where to get help and where you can refer the person onwards. Reserve a one-on-one moment for the conversation. If your university has a student substance abuse prevention programme, you should get acquainted with it in advance. The programme provides details on how to refer the student onwards in exactly your university, if the need arises.

## 2 Leave private life out – intervene from your work role

### Ability to study first

During studies, it is common for studies and leisure time to overlap. If substance use interferes in reaching study goals, an intervention is necessary. Make it about maintaining the ability to study.

### Lean on common ground rules

Leaning on the ground rules and practices of the university/the field of education provides a more solid basis than talking about another person's private life. If necessary, review the ground rules from a document such as the student substance abuse prevention programme.

## Do not therapise

You do not have to be a therapist or be able to help the person with all of their problems. The most important thing is that you really listen and refer the person onwards, if necessary.

## But I do indulge myself?

You have the obligation to intervene in substance use that decreases the ability to study or work regardless of the way you personally use any intoxicating substances. Having thought about your own relationship with substances can, of course, make it easier to talk about the matter.

## You can change the community

Consider what kind of substance use culture you want to participate in creating.

## 3 No blaming, but rather listening and focusing on personal resources

### The objective of broaching the topic is for the student to get help

The student may be hesitant to tell about, for example, about their drug use due to the consequences substance use could have for their studies. However, the objective of broaching the topic is not to lay blame but rather to motivate the student to seek help in order to maintain their ability to study. Make this clear.

### Talk about your own worry

There is no single right way to start the conversation. Talk about your own perceptions and what has got you worried. "You have seemed exhausted recently. How are you doing?" However, be careful not to blame or heap guilt on anyone.

### Active listening is important

Listen, let the person explain their thoughts and be open to there being many reasons for the behaviour that has caused you to worry. Avoid making rash interpretations and analyses. Make sure there is a shared understanding: "Did I understand correctly..." Broaching is usually more

effective if you are able to show to the other person that you really care about them.

### Make the person commit to their own decisions

Favour solution-oriented open questions: How do you see the matter? What could be done to the situation? What would you be willing to do? Let the student propose means for reaching the objective and agree on them together.

## 4 How to proceed from here?

### Make sure the person knows where to get help

Broaching does not always automatically mean the person is motivated to get help. However, it is important to review together what are the parties that could offer help if necessary (e.g. student health services, the free-of-charge substance abuse helpline, different websites.)

### Assess your own actions

What went well in broaching, what did not? Consider the matter for a moment and you will be better prepared the next time.



## The university's guidance services

- FSHS
- Municipal mental health and substance abuse services
- Substance abuse helpline: help and support for those concerned about their own substance use or that of a loved one, **tel. +358 (0)800 90045**, [ehyt.fi/paihdeneuvonta](https://ehyt.fi/paihdeneuvonta)
- AddictionLink: self-help tools for monitoring, reducing and quitting substance abuse and information on various substances, [paihdelinkki.fi/en](https://paihdelinkki.fi/en)
- OttoMitta mobile app for monitoring alcohol consumption (in Finnish): [ehyt.fi/tuote/ottomitta-sovellus-alkoholinkayton-seurantaan](https://ehyt.fi/tuote/ottomitta-sovellus-alkoholinkayton-seurantaan)
- Peluuri: information, tools and support for addressing a gambling problem [peluuri.fi/en](https://peluuri.fi/en)
- Intervention for cannabis use among young people project's self-help website for reducing or quitting cannabis use: (in Finnish) [kannabis.eu](https://kannabis.eu)
- Nytyi ry, [nyyti.fi/en](https://nyyti.fi/en)
- MIELI Mental Health Finland's crisis helpline, **tel. +358 (0)9 2525 0111**, [mieli.fi/en](https://mieli.fi/en)
- Sekasin chat by MIELI Mental Health Finland (site in Finnish): [sekasin247.fi](https://sekasin247.fi)
- Mentalhub, [mielenterveystalo.fi/en](https://mielenterveystalo.fi/en)

This guide was produced by KUPLA – students reforming substance use culture project (2018-2020). The project's goal was to support the well-being of university students and their ability to study, improves the abilities of university communities to prevent harm caused by substance use, and promotes communality and an accessible student culture. KUPLA encourages open discussion regarding substance use and matters related to mental well-being in university communities.

**Further information:** [ehyt.fi/kupla](https://ehyt.fi/kupla)