

INTRO TO SUBSTANCE USE

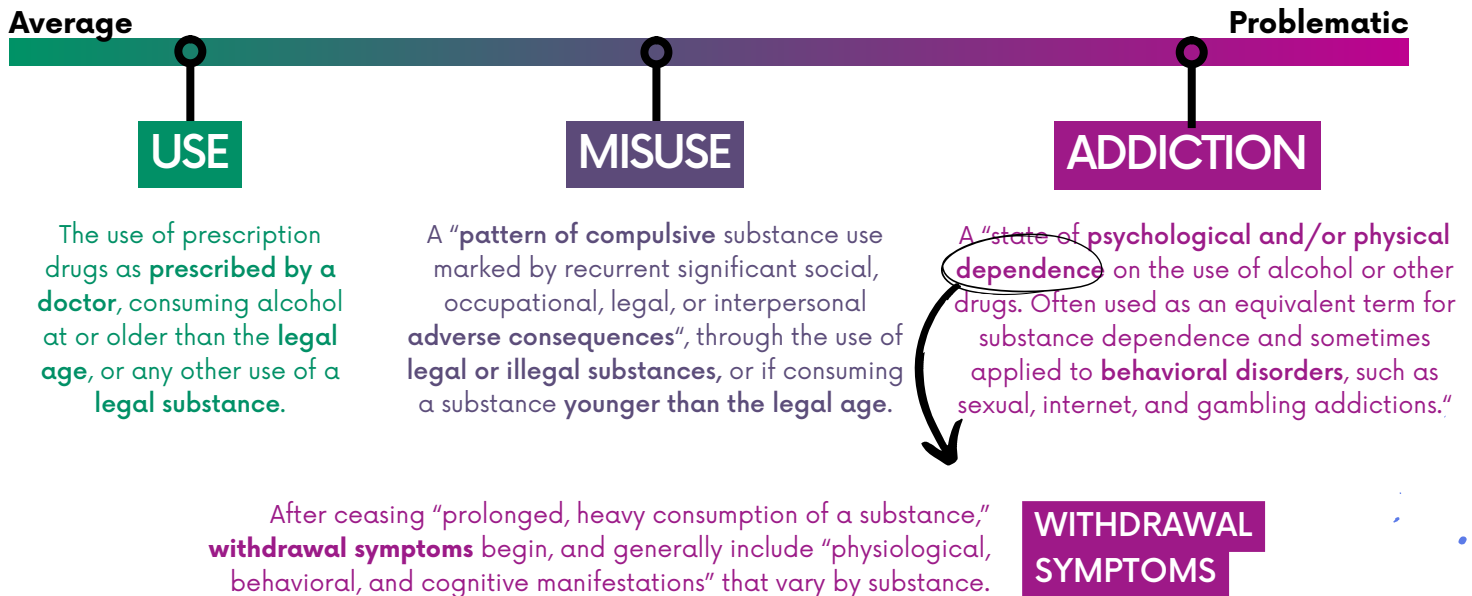
Many western cultures may consider **substance use (SU)** in **emerging adults** typical. However, self-reported data by youth and teen tell a different story. In 2023, United States 8th, 10th, and 12th graders reported **less illicit drug use** in the past year than 2022, similar to those of pre-pandemic levels.¹ Similarly, abstention from **illicit drug use rose** for all three grades, and was the highest ever recorded for 12th graders (since 2017).²

This chapter begins by defining **substance use** as on a spectrum.

What Counts as Substance Use?

SU is the use of certain substances, such as **alcohol, tobacco, drugs, inhalants,** and **other substances** that can be **consumed, inhaled, injected,** or otherwise **absorbed** into the body with possible **dependence** and other long-term effects.

Spectrum of Substance Use³



Substance Use Disorder

Substance use disorder (SUD) is a complex condition in which there is uncontrolled use of a **substance** despite harmful consequences. People with **SUD** have an intense focus on using a certain **substance(s)** such as alcohol, tobacco, marijuana, or illicit drugs to the point where the person's ability to function in day-to-day life becomes impaired.⁴

CULTURE OF SUBSTANCE USE

Often, adults and professionals talking with **emerging adults** about **substance use** err on the side of “just say no.” Simple enough, right? Unfortunately, there are many influences in an **emerging adult's** life that may cause them to view **substance use** as a normal, and even helpful, activity. The **Ecological Systems Theory** shown below displays four levels of environmental systems that hold influence over an individual (**emerging adult** in this case), and, in turn, can result in normalization of **substance use**.

Ecological Systems Theory and Substance Use⁵

Society

- Television, movie, music, and social media depiction of substance use as common and normal
- “Rite of passage” when going to college or turning a certain age

Community

- Advertisements for vapes, energy drinks, alcohol, etc.
- Dispensaries, liquor stores, or drug dealers within neighborhoods
- Access to transportation
- Inequitable addiction treatment

Relationships

- Family or peer use of substance use
- Ease of access to substances

Individual

- Underlying mental and/or physical health condition
- Traumatic event
- Brain development

Results in:

- Seeing **media** depict teenagers and adults blacking out at a party as “fun,” use of vapes without any observable consequences, or drinking after a hard day to relieve stress.
- Companies or drug dealers knowing that the best way to gain “consumers” is through making people aware of their product within their **neighborhoods**.
- **Lack of access to behavioral healthcare** due to inconsistent transportation.⁶
- **Distrust** of addiction treatment providers due to **racial and cultural discrimination**.⁷
- Seeing **family or peers** using substances without immediate consequences, showing an **emerging adult** that it is ok and safe to use the same amount as that individual.⁸ However, that person’s tolerance may be much higher than theirs, leading to a potential of overdose.
- People with **mental illness** using drugs or alcohol as a form of self-medication.⁹
- A unique connection* between **trauma** and problematic **substance use**.¹⁰
- **Brain functions** not fully developed in areas that are responsible for decision-making until one’s mid-20s.¹¹

*For many adolescents (45%–66%), **SUDs** precede the onset of trauma exposure. Additionally, several studies have found that problematic **substance use** developed following trauma exposure (25%–76%) or the onset of PTSD (14%–59%) in a high proportion of teens with **SUDs**.