



Talking pot with youth

A Cannabis Communication Guide for
Youth Allies



Co-designed with input from youth and youth allies



Canadian Centre
on Substance Use
and Addiction

Evidence. Engagement. Impact.

Acknowledgements

This guide is stronger because of the expertise of the youth and youth allies who were involved in its creation.

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Introduction

We know that Canadian youth are doing their own research online about cannabis and are talking with their friends about its benefits and harms. But they're also getting inconsistent messages: they have heard that there are some potential benefits to using cannabis, but feel that the adults in their lives often overlook or purposely leave out this perspective. (Throughout this guide, “youth” and “young people” refer to people 14 to 24 years old.)

We asked young people what they want in a conversation about cannabis, and they told us they want to share their thoughts and opinions, not to simply listen to the thoughts and opinions of others. They want to hear both sides of the story — the good and the bad — and would like this information presented to them in an unbiased way. Youth told us that when they are engaged in meaningful discussions about cannabis, they can be more informed about the issues and can make better decisions. (To learn more about what youth want and their thoughts on cannabis use, see our [Canadian Youth Perceptions on Cannabis](#) report.)

The [legal status](#) of cannabis for non-medical purposes is changing. It is important to be informed about legal age restrictions and their impact on Canadian youth. Cannabis is one of the most common substances used by Canadian youth next to alcohol; it is natural for young people to feel curious and have questions about it. We need to engage with youth in conversations about cannabis, but these conversations must be of the right kind.

This guide takes a harm reduction approach to talking with youth about cannabis. Its purpose is to help those who work with young people to have the right kind of conversations with them about cannabis: conversations that are safe, unbiased, informed and non-judgmental.

What This Guide Will Do

This guide will help you understand the youth perspective on what makes an effective youth ally. It provides a series of exercises that will:

- Guide you through a self-assessment process to determine your potential biases and explain how to set these biases aside before talking with youth about cannabis;
- Provide you with the values and principles for supportive communication, including practical ways to create a safe space for youth; and
- Lead you through the spectrum for using cannabis and support you in having judgment-free conversations about cannabis with youth.

What This Guide Will Not Do

It does not replace professional screening for, or treatment of, cannabis use disorder.

WHAT IS CANNABIS?

Cannabis, more commonly called marijuana, pot or weed, is a greenish or brownish material consisting of the dried flowers and leaves of the cannabis plant, *Cannabis sativa*. Hashish or cannabis resin is the dried brown or black resinous secretion of the flowers of the cannabis plant and can be further processed to produce hash oil, wax or shatter.



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Who Should Use this Guide?

Anyone who is looking for practical approaches to talking with youth about cannabis can use this guide. Effective communication requires you to be open to new ways of approaching the conversation and willing to participate in the conversation as an equal partner with young people.

Are You a Youth Ally?

Youth allies are people who use a combination of attitudes, skills and awareness to help create safe spaces that support and nurture open discussions with youth. They can include parents, family members, teachers, coaches, counsellors, healthcare professionals or any other person trusted by young people. Connections between youth allies and youth are very important. We know that these relationships create better outcomes for young people, especially those who may be at risk.

We asked youth and youth allies about the skills and attributes that are important for this role. They said youth allies are:

- **Approachable**
- **Trustworthy**
- **Non-judgmental**
- **Empathetic**
- **Understanding**
- **Experienced**
- **Good listeners**
- **Respectful**
- **Authentic**
- **Accepting**
- **Patient**

Know Your Role as a Youth Ally

Are you comfortable with having uncomfortable conversations with the young people in your life? Being a youth ally means you're an approachable adult and youth feel comfortable around you. They trust you, respect you and—most importantly—want to confide in you and get your advice. This does not need to be a daunting or intimidating experience for you. This guide can help you build on your strengths.

With your support, the young people in your life will feel more engaged in discussions about cannabis, which will help them make choices that are more informed. And remember that just because you're talking openly about drug use doesn't mean you're encouraging or advocating for drug use. As you start having conversations about cannabis, try not to lose sight of what made you a youth ally in the first place. Continue to be accessible and supportive to young people, and continue to offer a safe place where they can turn.

COMPLEMENTARY RESOURCES

- [Help Your Teen Understand What's Fact and Fiction About Marijuana](#), Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction / Parent Action on Drugs
- [Canada's Lower-Risk Cannabis Use Guidelines](#), Centre for Addiction and Mental Health
- [Cannabis in Canada: Get the facts](#), Government of Canada
- [Cannabis Talk Kit: Know how to talk with your teen](#), Drug Free Kids Canada
- [Sensible Cannabis Education: A toolkit for educating youth](#), Canadian Students for Sensible Drug Policy



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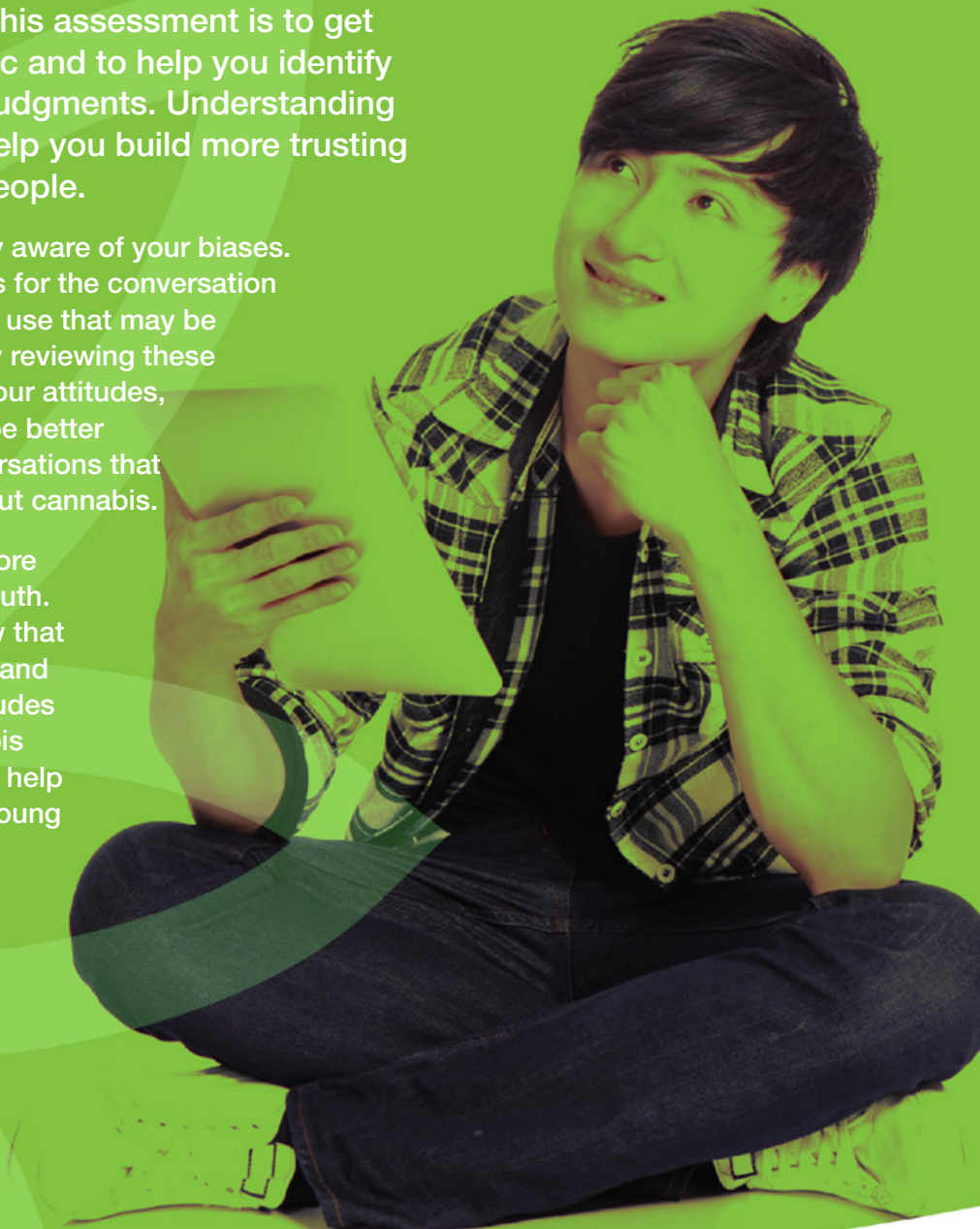
Exercise

CHECK YOURSELF

To begin, we are going to guide you through a self-assessment of your current perspectives on cannabis. The purpose of this assessment is to get you thinking about the topic and to help you identify your personal biases and judgments. Understanding your preconceptions will help you build more trusting relationships with young people.

You may feel that you're already aware of your biases. You may also have certain goals for the conversation or perspectives about cannabis use that may be hard for you to leave behind. By reviewing these perceptions and reflecting on your attitudes, beliefs and approaches, you'll be better prepared for the types of conversations that young people want to have about cannabis.

You should do this exercise before you talk about cannabis with youth. Don't be afraid to let them know that you've completed this exercise and are always evaluating your attitudes and perceptions toward cannabis and cannabis use. Doing so will help build trust and credibility with young people.



EXERCISE 1: Check Yourself

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Self-assessment Exercise

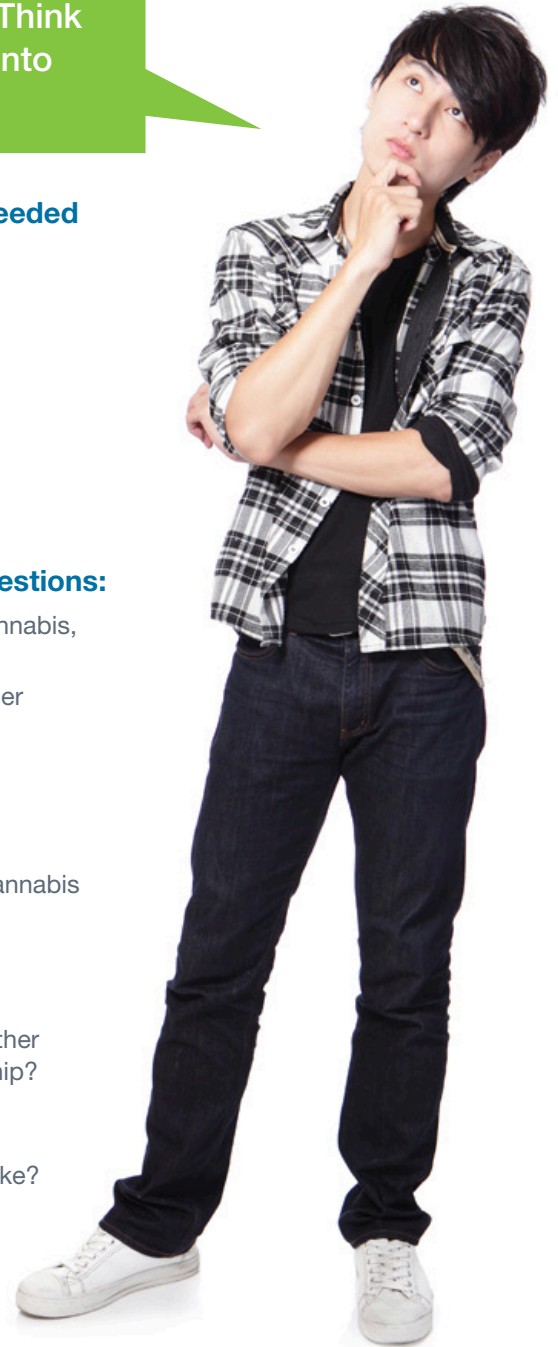
Set aside some time to think about your intentions for engaging in conversations about cannabis with youth. Write down your thoughts for each question below. Think about what you are trying to achieve before you go into the conversation.

1. Reflect back to when you were younger and what you needed from the youth allies in your life. Ask yourself:

- What was it like being [insert age of the youth you're talking to]?
- What were some of the stresses you were experiencing?
- What were your needs while experiencing these pressures?
- What was your perspective on cannabis?
- How did you feel about cannabis use? Did you have positive, negative or neutral feelings about it?
- What types of questions did you have about cannabis?

2. Keeping these insights in mind, answer the following questions:

- If you are choosing to initiate a conversation with youth about cannabis, what is motivating you to do so?
 - Is this conversation motivated by a specific event, fear or other emotion?
- What is your current opinion on cannabis use?
 - Why do you think you feel this way?
 - What do you think contributed to your current opinion?
 - Do you feel you are properly informed about cannabis and cannabis use?
- How do you manage stress and anxiety in your personal life?
- Do you use substances such as alcohol or tobacco? If yes, why?
 - What type of relationship do you have with substances? In other words, would you consider it a positive or negative relationship?
 - Have you or anyone you know been negatively affected by cannabis use?
 - In your opinion, what does problematic substance use look like?



- Are you concerned about cannabis use by young people? Why or why not?
 - How do you feel about the youth in your life using cannabis?
- What are your biggest fears about the youth in your life and cannabis?
- Are you using language that could reveal your biases about cannabis? For example, do you use stigmatizing terms such as *stoner*, *pothead*, *druggie* or *burnout*?
- How does your point of view affect what you say and how you feel or think about cannabis?
 - How does it affect the way you react to someone who uses cannabis?

3. Next, think about how your opinions and perspectives about cannabis might influence your discussions with youth. Youth told us that allies who come into a conversation with an agenda and preconceived opinions appear insincere. Pay attention to the words you use, your reactions to questions from young people, and your thoughts and feelings about the topic. Be honest with yourself. As you use this guide, be mindful of these opinions, perspectives, thoughts and feelings.



EXERCISE 1: Check Yourself

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Exercise

PREPARE FOR THE CONVERSATION

The purpose of this exercise is to help you establish the values and guiding principles for supportive communication. After you have completed your self-reflection, the tips provided in this exercise will help ensure you approach your conversations with young people in an effective, non-biased and judgment-free way.



EXERCISE 2: Prepare for the Conversation

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PART 1

Getting in the Right Frame of Mind

As you prepare for the conversation, you need to get in the right frame of mind. This process begins with you letting go of the judgments you identified in your self-reflection and establishing a clear purpose for the conversation, taking into consideration the needs and goals of the young people you are engaging with.

Release Judgment

Now that you are aware of your judgments and biases about cannabis and youth cannabis use, you can begin to pay attention to them to stop them from influencing your conversations. Try to catch yourself if your thinking turns judgmental. Approach the conversation with openness and let go of any preconceptions that a certain thought or opinion is better than another. This neutrality means no longer seeing something as good or bad, right or wrong. It also means:

- Listening to young people without evaluation;
- Identifying if you and the young people you are engaging with have a shared goal, then exploring commonalities and overlapping thoughts or feelings;
- Identifying how you and the young people are different and similar; and
- Being open to what a young person can teach you and the things you can both relate to.

Identify Your Purpose

You need to have a clear idea of why you're having a conversation about cannabis use. Ask yourself:

- Why do I want to have this conversation?
- What are the reasons this young person might have for engaging in this conversation?



EXERCISE 2: Prepare for the Conversation



PART 2

Establishing Values

When we asked young people what they need from a youth ally, they mentioned the eight values listed below. These values are the foundations for effective conversations about cannabis and should guide the way you approach the conversations you have with the youth in your life.

- **Supportive:** Show support by being helpful and understanding, and by showing solidarity with youth. This means standing by them when they make their own decisions, even if you might disagree with those decisions.
- **Empathetic:** Show empathy to youth by being emotionally present and attentive, and by having the ability to see and feel from the young person's point of view. Try putting yourself in their shoes and getting a better understanding of what they are going through.
- **Respectful:** Have respect for the self-worth and value of the youth in your life. This includes respecting their opinion, even if you don't agree with what they are saying.
- **Genuine:** Be honest and sincere. Youth will trust you if your thoughts, feelings and motives are easy to see. Anything else can lead to a sense of betrayal. To be viewed as a genuine person, you need to be someone youth can trust under difficult conditions.
- **Transparent:** Be transparent about the goals of the conversation. You should be open and honest from the start about why you want to have this conversation with youth.
- **Trustworthy:** Be a person youth can trust and confide in. They want to feel safe and want to know that the information they are sharing with you will stay private.
- **Empowering:** Give youth the power and tools to feel confident and more in control of their lives. This includes helping young people come to decisions or solutions that they can feel good about.
- **Practical:** Be practical about what your conversation is trying to accomplish. Don't enter the conversation thinking you will change the young person's perspective. Instead, try to gain a better understanding of their perspective.



EXERCISE 2: Prepare for the Conversation



PART 3

Creating a Safe Space

When we refer to a safe space, we do not mean a physical space. We mean a judgment-free, non-biased, non-stigmatizing environment where youth feel accepted, valued and respected. When in a safe space, youth will feel they can contribute in a meaningful way. We asked young people about what's required to create a safe space where they would feel a sense of openness and be more likely to share their thoughts. They suggested the following steps and considerations.

1. Think about language, tone and approach

- Use language that creates and encourages openness, understanding and a feeling of safety. Try saying things like:
 - *How do you feel about this topic?*
 - *This information is very helpful. I would like to learn more about that.*
- Avoid using language that could be harmful, including stigmatizing words (such as stoner, user or addict), expressions of disapproval or preachy language. When you use that kind of language, it closes down conversation and stops youth from reaching out for help.
- Avoid an approach that seems like an interview. Don't ask too many questions. Instead, engage in a two-way conversation.
- Use shared language. Use the same terms used by the young person and ensure you are speaking at their language level.
- Ask clarifying questions to check your understanding. Try asking things like:
 - *Can you tell me more about your opinion on that?*
 - *Can you help me understand what you mean by that?*

2. Be present and mindful

- Be in the moment. There will likely be times where you are thinking about other things. Be aware of this and try to focus on the conversation at hand.
- Be aware of your emotions and the emotions of others. This awareness is important in monitoring your reactions and responses.

3. Listen

- Listen first, without interrupting. Let the youth finish sharing their thoughts. Show interest by asking meaningful questions, such as:
 - *Can you give me an example of how that made you feel?*
- Practice silence—sometimes youth need a bit of time to open up. Remember to take your time before responding. If you notice that you are reacting emotionally to something shared with you, take a deep breath and count to 10 before responding.
- Acknowledge emotions, thoughts, feelings and pressures when they are shared. One way to do this is to say that you are hearing the young person's concerns:
 - *I can see this is of concern to you. Tell me more about it.*





4. Be honest

- Be open about your purpose and goals from the beginning of the conversation. Don't try to hide your agenda or strategize to get what you want from the conversation. If you do, the person you are talking with will see you as untrustworthy.

5. Provide supportive responses

- Respect the fact that the youth has chosen to share information with you. Even if you disagree with what is being shared, you need to respect that this is their reality.
- Engage in supportive communication. Instead of judging what is being shared with you and trying to provide advice, try to understand the youth's perspective and invite them into a conversation.
- Avoid closed-ended questions where the answer is either "yes" or "no." Use open-ended questions to get more details and encourage further discussion. Ask questions like:
 - *How are you feeling today?*
 - *What are your thoughts on this topic?*
- Respond in a way that focuses on the youth's thoughts and feelings. For example, they might be trying to tell you that they are feeling stressed out and not coping well. You could try responding with:
 - *After hearing how much you have going on, I can understand why you might be feeling overwhelmed and stressed.*
- Rephrase what the youth has told you. This will show that you care and have heard what they are saying.
- Take into account the following considerations before providing feedback on a conversation that has just taken place:
 - Is the youth ready to receive feedback?
 - Watch your tone of voice. Speak with a calm tone and manner.
 - Describe rather than interpreting and judging.
 - Don't be too eager to give advice and instead encourage further discussion. Ask the young person how they think they should move forward with the situation.

6. Be mindful of non-verbal communication

- Use positive non-verbal communications during your conversations:
 - Face the speaker;
 - Maintain an open posture by not crossing your arms;
 - Be calm and relaxed, which is reflected in both your body language and facial expressions;
 - Maintain eye contact when possible and if appropriate;
 - Respect the youth's personal space;
 - Dress appropriately (for example, if you are a police officer, does wearing your uniform give you credibility or will it intimidate the youth?); and
 - Allow the youth to select the location for this discussion, if possible.

In summary, you can help create a safe space for youth by keeping the following tips in mind during your conversation:

- Try first to understand, then to be understood.
- Focus on what is being said to you.
- Be an active listener.
- Ask open-ended questions.
- Be aware of your own biases or values. They may distort what you hear.
- Do not rehearse your answers in your head while the other person is talking.
- Use clarifying questions or statements to check your perceptions.
- Pause to think before you answer.
- Do not judge. Affirm that you understand, but avoid using expressions of approval or disapproval.
- Do not insist on having the last word.
- Be mindful of the agreed-upon goals for the conversation.



EXERCISE 2: Prepare for the Conversation

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Exercise

UNDERSTAND THE SPECTRUM OF CANNABIS USE

To help find out how you could have better conversations with youth about cannabis, we asked young people about their motives for using cannabis. What we heard is that they use cannabis for a variety of reasons. Some are influenced by friends, family and community. Some use it to help relieve stress or manage mental health issues. Others might have become dependent on the drug.

Youth had many questions about how much cannabis they could use before it became harmful to their physical and mental health. We've provided some answers to these questions and we encourage you to use this exercise to guide the discussions you have with youth about responsible and risky cannabis use.

EXERCISE 3: Understand the Spectrum of Cannabis Use

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When the Conversation Gets Tough

As a youth ally, you are trying to help youth think critically about the information they are seeing, hearing and reading about cannabis. Instead of telling them what they should know or not know about cannabis, encourage them to explore the questions they might have about it. For example, think about why people make different choices to use or not use cannabis. What might influence these choices? We know that many youth use cannabis to help manage their stress. Why might this be? Do we think there are better ways to deal with feelings of anxiety?

Use the conversation as an opportunity to encourage youth to think critically about their current cannabis beliefs and attitudes. The following questions can help you guide the conversation in that direction:

- What do you think responsible cannabis use looks like? Why?
- What do you think risky cannabis use looks like?
- What does unhealthy use of cannabis look like?
- Why do you think people find using cannabis helpful or pleasurable?
- What do you think are the benefits of cannabis use?
- Could cannabis use be harmful? Why? How?
- When do you think cannabis use might become harmful for a person?
- Why might some people not be able to stop using cannabis?
- Why do you think you need to experiment with cannabis at this point?



EXERCISE 3: Understand the Spectrum of Cannabis Use

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The Spectrum of Cannabis Use for Non-medical Purposes

We often think about drug use in terms of addiction or dependence. However, the use of cannabis by young people for non-medical purposes can fall anywhere along a spectrum: no use, experimental use, social or intermittent use, regular or heavy use, and cannabis use disorder. You can use this spectrum to inform your discussions around responsible and risky cannabis use. During your discussions, you should not try to screen for cannabis use disorder; leave such screening to the professionals. Instead, it is meant to get you and the young people in your life thinking critically about cannabis use.

Your goal should be to show your interest in this topic, not to approach the conversation with accusations and fears. It is also important that youth have the opportunity to identify their own needs and goals early in the conversation. Providing this opportunity will help you build trust and guide the conversation from a youth perspective.

During your discussion about the spectrum of cannabis use, keep in mind the following points:

- The legal status of cannabis is changing. It is important for youth and youth allies to [be informed](#).
- It is natural for youth to feel curious and have questions about cannabis.
- We know youth are doing their own research. It is important for youth to seek out credible sources and get factual information.
- It can be helpful for youth to talk to youth allies they trust.
- When youth are able to engage in meaningful and unbiased discussions about cannabis, they are more informed, which can support them in their decision making.
- It is important for youth and youth allies to be aware of the [health effects and risks unique to youth populations who use cannabis](#).



Some of the language used in the following sections reflects the language young people used to describe their reasons for cannabis use.

1. No use

- Example: Someone who is open to or curious about cannabis use.
- The person might be interested in cannabis use and thinking about trying it.
- The person might be researching cannabis use or want more information.
- There may be something preventing the person from trying cannabis.
- Key messages for youth:
 - Your brain is still developing and the earlier you begin to use cannabis, the more likely you are to experience health harms or, in more serious cases, develop an addiction to cannabis.

2. Experimental use or low use

- Example: Someone who just tried cannabis for the first time.
- The person is experimenting with cannabis to see how it feels.
- The person might be using cannabis because their friends are using it.
- The person might not be aware of the harms or effects of cannabis at this point.
- Key messages for youth:
 - Delay cannabis use as long as possible. Your brain is still developing and early cannabis use can affect cognition, memory and attention.
 - Avoid combining cannabis with alcohol and other substances.
 - Don't drive after using cannabis. Plan alternative options to get home or sleep at a friend's house.
 - Make sure you are in a safe environment if you are planning to use cannabis. To ensure you are safe, consider who you are with and what hazards may be around you.



3. Social or intermittent use

- Example: Someone who uses cannabis only occasionally — once a week at most, usually on the weekend.
- The person uses cannabis mainly in social settings as part of an activity to spend time with friends or family.
- The person might think cannabis offers health benefits.
- The person does not associate cannabis use with significant health or social harms.
- Key messages for youth:
 - Delay or minimize cannabis use as long and as much as possible. Your brain is still developing and early cannabis use can affect cognition, memory and attention.
 - Starting use at an early age and using it often is associated with increased risk for psychosis and schizophrenia, especially among those with a family history.
 - Avoid combining cannabis with alcohol and other substances.
 - Don't drive after using cannabis. Plan alternative options to get home or sleep at a friend's house.
 - Try to avoid daily or near-daily cannabis use.
 - Consider vaping rather than smoking cannabis.
 - Stopping cannabis smoking can reverse the harms to your lungs.
 - Refrain from deep inhalation and holding your breath after inhaling.
 - If you eat cannabis, “start low and go slow” with small amounts and wait at least two hours before eating more to avoid accidental overconsumption.

Schizophrenia is a chronic and severe mental disorder that affects how a person thinks, feels and behaves. People with schizophrenia can seem like they have lost touch with reality. Although schizophrenia is not as common as other mental disorders, the symptoms can be disabling.

The word **psychosis** is used to categorize a range of conditions that affect the mind. During a period of psychosis, a person's thoughts and perceptions are disturbed, and they can have difficulty understanding what is real and what is not. Symptoms include delusions (false beliefs) and hallucinations (seeing or hearing things that others do not see or hear).



EXERCISE 3: Understand the Spectrum of Cannabis Use

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4. Regular or heavy use

- Example: Someone who uses cannabis daily or almost daily. At first, they might have used cannabis occasionally, but then started using it to cope and might not be aware that they have lost control over their use. When they stop using cannabis, they may experience some withdrawal symptoms such as mood changes or sleep disruption.
- Note that there may be physical symptoms from heavy use. These could include:
 - Abdominal pain
 - Shakiness or tremors
 - Sweating, fever or chills
 - Headaches
- This level of use often corresponds with harmful or negative health and social consequences, such as driving impaired and short-term memory loss.
- Someone using cannabis regularly might be self-medicating a condition that could be better managed by other means or alleviating cannabis withdrawal.
- Cannabis use at this stage can have negative effects at the individual level (for example, loss of control over use, spending large amounts of money on cannabis), as well as at the social level (for example, impaired driving, disconnection or conflict, missing or dropping out of important activities).
- Key messages for youth:
 - Understand the underlying reasons for use.
 - Consider consulting with a healthcare practitioner if:
 - You are using cannabis to cope or self-medicate;
 - Cannabis use is affecting your ability to meet your major life obligations;
 - You are missing or reducing important activities because of your cannabis use;
 - You continue to use cannabis even though you are experiencing physical or psychological problems; or
 - You have any other questions or concerns about cannabis use.
 - To avoid developing cannabis use disorder, try to use less frequently or stop when use becomes hard to control.
 - Avoid using large amounts of cannabis and more potent products.



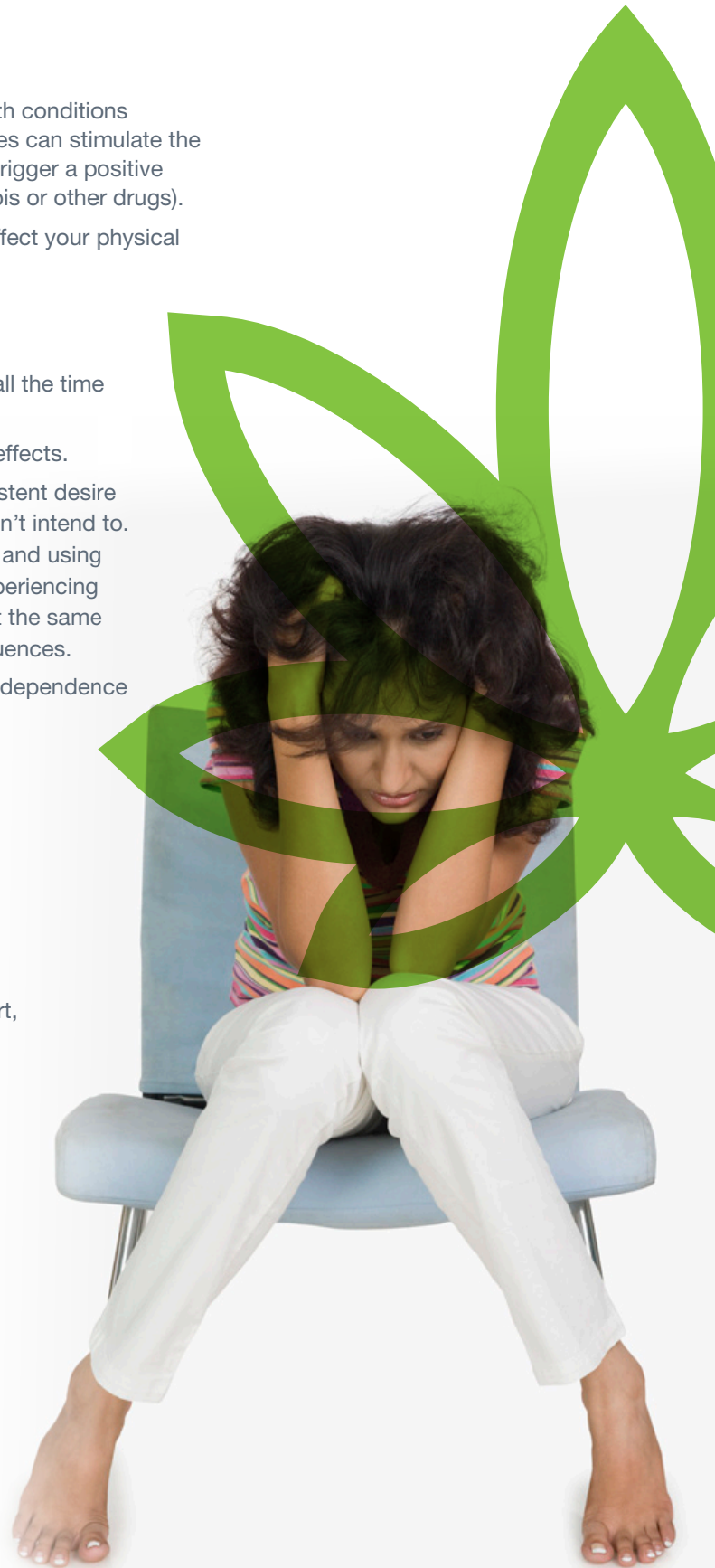
EXERCISE 3: Understand the Spectrum of Cannabis Use



- o Consider alternative options to manage health conditions (for example, exercise, arts and other activities can stimulate the release of chemicals called endorphins that trigger a positive feeling in the body without the use of cannabis or other drugs).
- o Re-evaluate your goals. Cannabis use can affect your physical health and hobbies, such as your ability to play sports.

5. Cannabis Use Disorder

- Example: Someone who needs to use cannabis all the time and becomes irritable when they're not using it.
- Use at this stage has negative health and social effects.
- Someone with cannabis use disorder has a persistent desire to use cannabis or may use it even when they don't intend to. They spend an excessive amount of time getting and using cannabis. And they continue to use it despite experiencing health problems, needing more of the drug to get the same effects and experiencing negative social consequences.
- Withdrawal symptoms associated with cannabis dependence can include psychological symptoms, such as:
 - o Cravings
 - o Irritability
 - o Anger
 - o Aggression
 - o Anxiety
 - o Sleep disturbances
 - o Decreased appetite
 - o Depressed mood
- Physical symptoms causing significant discomfort, such as:
 - o Abdominal pain
 - o Weight loss
 - o Restlessness
 - o Shakiness or tremors
 - o Sweating, fever or chills
 - o Headaches
- Key messages for youth:
 - o If you are experiencing symptoms of cannabis use disorder or addiction, consult with a healthcare professional.
 - o If you are looking for information on treatment in your area, visit: <http://www.ccsa.ca/Eng/Pages/Addictions-Treatment-Helplines-Canada.aspx>.



EXERCISE 3: Understand the Spectrum of Cannabis Use

Additional Resources

[Sensible Cannabis Toolkit](#), Canadian Students for Sensible Drug Policy

[Building Resilient Youth](#), Parent Action on Drugs

[Safer Cannabis Use](#), Canadian Institute for Substance Use Research

[Discussing Youth Cannabis Use in Your Community](#), Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction

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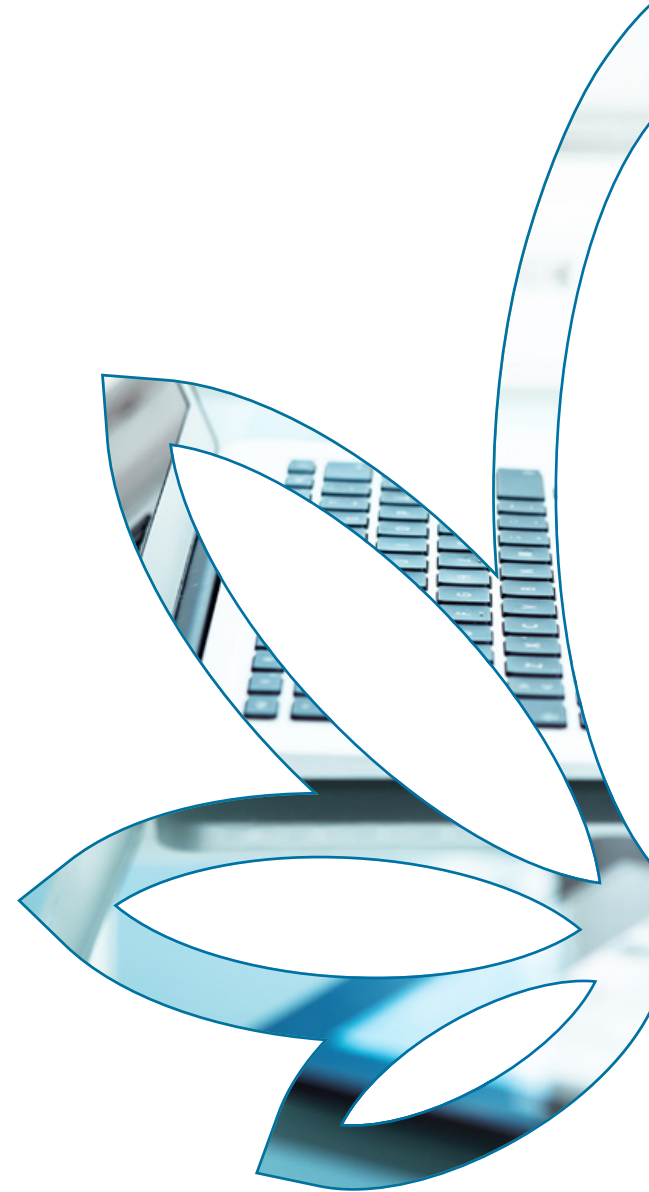
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