# Understanding the Process of Addiction

Participant Workbook | Notice patterns • Recognize risks • Choose support

The four stages below are a way to discuss changing substance-use patterns. They are not a diagnosis or a fixed path. People may have different experiences, and help is useful at any point.

## The four-stage teaching model

### Stage 1: Experimentation

Initial or occasional use, sometimes in a social or exploratory context. Immediate negative effects may be absent or unnoticed. Not everyone who experiments develops a substance-use disorder.

### Stage 2: Regular Use

Use becomes more frequent or routine. The reasons for using, the situations in which use occurs, and its effects on daily life deserve attention. Regular use alone does not establish a diagnosis.

### Stage 3: High-Risk Use

Use continues in hazardous situations or despite emerging problems, such as impaired driving, relationship conflict, or missed obligations. This is a useful opportunity to seek help, but the model cannot predict who will develop a disorder.

### Stage 4: Addiction / Substance-Use Disorder

Substance use may involve impaired control, craving, continued use despite harm, and changes in functioning. A clinical assessment considers a pattern of symptoms. Tolerance or withdrawal may occur but neither is required for diagnosis; withdrawal can also occur with prescribed medications without indicating addiction.

## Activity 1: The turning-point timeline

Use a fictional person or a general example. Identify when a behavior changed, what warning signs appeared, and where support might have helped.

First use or early pattern: _____

Change in frequency, context, or reasons: _____

Possible warning signs or consequences: _____

Opportunity for support: _____

## Activity 2: Jordan’s story

Jordan first tried a substance at gatherings, then began using most weekends. Later, Jordan sometimes used before driving, missed commitments, and had difficulty keeping planned limits.

Which details suggest risk? What would you need to know before making a clinical judgment?

_____

_____

What is one immediate safety step Jordan could take?

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Discussion and early-intervention plan

## Activity 3: Warning sign, concern, or unknown?

For each statement, write “safety concern,” “reason to seek assessment,” or “not enough information.” More than one answer may be reasonable. Discuss why.

• A person drives while impaired.

My answer and why: _____

• A person uses alcohol on weekends.

My answer and why: _____

• A person continues using despite repeated serious harm.

My answer and why: _____

• A person experiences withdrawal after stopping a prescribed medicine.

My answer and why: _____

• A person tries a substance once.

My answer and why: _____

## Discussion questions

1. What makes it difficult to notice a shift from occasional to harmful use?

_____

2. What warning signs deserve attention even before a person meets diagnostic criteria?

_____

3. How might stress, trauma, mental health, relationships, and environment affect a person’s risk?

_____

4. What could someone say to a friend who is concerned about their use?

_____

5. What is one support or protective step a person can take before a crisis?

_____

## My early-intervention plan

A change or warning sign I want to notice:

_____

A safer response I could try:

_____

A trusted person, service, or support group I could contact:

_____

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One realistic next step:

_____

Safety reminder. Some substance withdrawal can be dangerous; seek medical advice rather than abruptly stopping alcohol, benzodiazepines, or other substances with potentially serious withdrawal. If someone is unresponsive or has signs of overdose, contact emergency services immediately. This is an educational worksheet, not a diagnostic test.

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