



Making your own choices about drugs

People take drugs for many different reasons. Whatever the reason, if you decide to take drugs it should always be your choice to do so, and you should make that choice with the right information from a trusted and reliable source.

Sometimes you might find it hard not to take drugs if you are surrounded by others who are taking them and expect you to take drugs with them. After all, wanting to be part of a group and feeling like you belong is a natural part of being human.

People who expect you to take drugs with them can include older adults, friends and sometimes even parents and other family members, so it's important to be ready to manage pressure from various angles.

Saying 'no' and not taking drugs, when most people around you are taking them can be very hard – especially if it has been or is a part of your family life. But sometimes the easiest way to get out of that situation is to tell the truth, to simply say 'no'. When you make excuses, it can often create an opportunity for people to try and convince you by adding extra pressure. Simply saying 'I don't want to' is a pretty hard statement to debate.

It may help you to know that by saying 'no' you're in the majority. Recent research has found that while some Australian teenagers do use illicit substances, the number has not increased.

Avoiding situations

The influence of peers on your behaviour

Peer pressure can happen when we are influenced to do something we would not normally do, or are stopped from doing something we would like to do. This may be because we want to be accepted by our peers and/or family.

A peer can be anyone you look up to, or someone who you think is an equal in age or ability. A peer could be a friend, someone in the community or even someone on TV. Most of us choose the peers we hang around with (although not always).

Peer pressure may be a positive influence and help challenge or motivate you to do your best. For example, if your friends tell you you've taken too much of a drug and that you're embarrassing yourself (and them) you might feel pressured to stop, take some time out or even go home.

However, peer pressure can also result in you doing stuff that may not fit with your sense of what is right and wrong. For example, you may not feel like taking drugs on a night out, but be pressured by friends and end up taking drugs because they want a big night and everyone else is taking them.

Peer pressure to take drugs may be present in the workplace, at school or uni, or in the general community. It can affect anyone, and can affect different people in different ways. Some of the ways it may affect you include:

Directly – you may experience peer pressure to take drugs if someone is telling you directly that you should take them to fit in with the crowd. It's a good idea to talk to someone you trust if you are being pressured into taking drugs when you don't want to. This may be a family member, teacher, youth worker or counsellor.

Indirectly – peer pressure may not always be obvious to you. It's not uncommon for a group of friends to have particular habits or activities that they do together – for example, drinking

or taking drugs. This might be particularly common in certain industries where taking drugs can be more prevalent, and taking them may be more socially acceptable or even normal. Work pressures may also mean that the natural thing for everyone to do at the end of the day is to go out and take drugs to relax, or even to stay awake and cope with the long hours of a job.

Some ideas to help you manage peer pressure to take drugs.

Value common interests – hanging out with people who share similar interests may help to avoid a situation where you feel pressured into doing things you don't want to do. Being part of the cool crowd may not be as much fun as it looks.

Say 'no' – having the strength to say 'no' may be hard, however, it also feels good to stick with what you believe in.

Try not to judge others – try not to place judgments on other people's choices. Respecting someone else's choice will help them to respect yours. Try to remember that you don't have to agree with their actions. Focusing on the reasons why you don't feel happy with the choice may help you not to judge them.

Take action – sometimes you are able to tackle peer pressure if you are older, or feel more comfortable in your environment. Standing up for someone else may help you feel stronger about your own decision.

Change your peer group – you usually choose your peers, so if your peer group is pressuring you and you want to avoid that pressure, then it might be an option to change peer group. Get involved in a new activity and meet new people.

Suggest activities that aren't drug-related – it's useful to get a bit creative and think of other activities you can all enjoy that don't revolve around taking drugs, for example, like going to the movies, reading, or playing a sport.

Pretend – sometimes when people are under the influence of drugs they can be more persistent and pushy than they realise. This means that saying 'no' is harder than it could be in other situations.

You could pretend you need to go home (because you feel sick or you forgot about something else you had to do, or even fake that you received an important phone call) to avoid being pressured into drug taking.

Putting pressure on yourself

Sometimes the pressure to take drugs might start with yourself. Feeling different from the group may be hard and to avoid this, we sometimes do things to make sure we feel like the rest of the group.

Moving to a new area or starting at a new high school, TAFE, university or job may be scary. Often it means having to make new friends and fit into a new environment. When you are feeling unsure about yourself, you may be more likely to or be more inclined to give in to the effects of peer pressure, and may resort to taking drugs to boost your confidence and reduce anxiety about meeting new people.

However, part of being an individual and looking after yourself first and foremost involves making decisions based on what is best for you. It means taking ownership and responsibility for what you do and how you think. Being an individual can still mean that you are a valued member of a group.