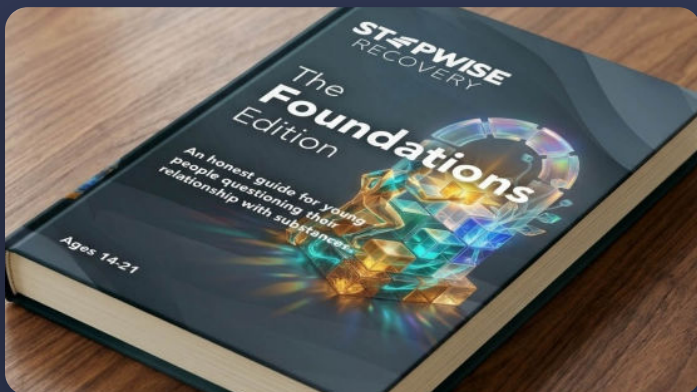


STEPWISE RECOVERY

FREE PREVIEW · NO EMAIL REQUIRED



The **Foundations Edition**

An honest guide for young people questioning
their relationship with substances

This preview contains the contents pages, the Introduction,
and the complete Chapter One — *Is This a Problem?* —
exactly as they appear in the printed book.

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PART ONE

HONEST LOOKING

Chapter One:

Is This a Problem?

Nobody wakes up one morning and decides to have a problem with drugs or alcohol. It doesn't work like that. It creeps up on you. What starts as something fun, something that helps you relax or fit in or escape for a while, slowly becomes something else. And by the time you start wondering whether it might be a problem, you've usually been wondering for longer than you'd like to admit.

If you're reading this, something brought you here. Maybe someone gave you this book. Maybe you found it yourself. Maybe you're just curious. Whatever the reason, the fact that you're holding it suggests a question has started forming somewhere in your mind, even if you're not quite ready to say it out loud.

Is this a problem?

That's not an easy question to sit with. And this chapter isn't going to answer it for you, because nobody can. What we can do is help you look at things honestly, without shame, without judgement, and without anyone telling you what to think. Just you, looking clearly at your own life.

The Word Nobody Wants to Use

Let's get something out of the way. Words like 'addict' and 'addiction' carry a lot of weight. They conjure up images, and those images probably don't look like you. They look like

someone older, someone whose life has fallen apart completely, someone sleeping rough or stealing from family. Someone else.

Here's the truth: most people who develop serious problems with substances don't fit that picture. Not at first. Not for a long time. And waiting until you do fit that picture before you take things seriously is like waiting until your house has burned down before you check if the smoke alarm works.

So we're not going to ask you to call yourself anything. We're not going to label you. What we are going to do is look at how substance use exists on a spectrum, and help you figure out where you might be on it.

The Spectrum

Think of substance use like a sliding scale. At one end, there's experimentation, trying something once or twice out of curiosity. At the other end, there's dependence, where your body and mind have become so used to a substance that you feel like you can't function without it. Most people who develop problems don't jump from one end to the other. They drift.

And this is more common than you might think: in the year to March 2025, around 15 in every 100 people aged 16 to 24 in England and Wales had used a drug in the past year (Office for National Statistics, 2025). Whatever end of the scale you're on, you're not the only one working this out.

Experimentation is trying something to see what it's like. There's no pattern to it. You could take it or leave it. Most people who experiment with drugs or alcohol stay here, they try something, it's not that interesting, and they move on.

Is This a Problem?

Recreational use is using something occasionally, usually in social situations. Drinking at parties. Smoking weed at weekends. Taking something at a festival. At this stage, you're still in control of when and how much. The substance fits around your life, not the other way around.

Regular use is where patterns start to form. It's not just at parties anymore, it's most weekends, or every time you're stressed, or every evening to wind down. You've started to rely on it for something, even if you don't think of it that way. You might notice you feel a bit off when you haven't used for a while.

Problematic use is when the substance starts causing problems in your life, and you keep using anyway. Your grades slip. You fall out with people. You spend money you don't have. You do things you regret. You tell yourself you'll cut down, and then you don't. The gap between what you intend to do and what you actually do starts getting wider.

Dependence is when your body and mind have adapted to expect the substance. You need more to get the same effect. You feel physically or mentally unwell when you stop. The thought of going without feels genuinely frightening. At this point, willpower alone often isn't enough.

These aren't rigid categories with clear borders between them. People move back and forth. Someone might drift into regular use, get scared, pull back for a while, then drift further than before. The direction of travel matters more than exactly where you are right now.

So here's a question worth sitting with: which direction are you moving?

Jade's Story

I didn't think I had a problem because I was still doing well at college. That was my measure, if I can still get good grades, I'm fine. And I was getting good grades. For a while.

It started with drinking at house parties, same as everyone. Then someone offered me coke one night and I thought, why not? It made everything feel sharper, more exciting. I felt confident in a way I never normally did. I wasn't even that bothered about drinking after that, coke was the thing.

At first it was just weekends. Then it was weekends and Wednesdays, because Wednesdays were hard and I deserved it. Then it was whenever I was going out. Then it was whenever I needed to get work done, because actually it helped me focus. Then it was whenever I felt anxious, which was most of the time.

I kept moving the goalposts. First it was 'I don't have a problem because I only do it at weekends.' Then 'I don't have a problem because I never do it alone.' Then 'I don't have a problem because I can afford it.' Then 'I don't have a problem because I'm not like those people.' I was always finding a new line I hadn't crossed yet, so I could tell myself I was fine.

The moment I couldn't ignore it anymore was when I missed my nan's birthday because I was too wrecked from the night before. I'd promised I'd be there. She'd made a cake. And I just... didn't show up. I was lying in bed feeling like death, and I told myself I had food poisoning. But I knew. Somewhere underneath all the excuses, I knew.

Jade was nineteen when she started asking herself the hard

questions. She's twenty-two now, and she's been in recovery for eighteen months. Looking back, she can see exactly where the drift happened, and how many opportunities she had to change direction before things got really bad.

"The signs were all there," she says now. "I just didn't want to see them. Or I saw them and told myself they didn't count."

Warning Signs

What Jade describes, moving the goalposts, finding new reasons why it's fine, is something almost everyone with a substance problem recognises. The mind is incredibly good at protecting us from uncomfortable truths.

Here are some warning signs that you might be drifting further along the spectrum than you'd like. None of these on their own means you have a problem. But if you're recognising several of them, it might be worth paying attention.

You think about it when you're not using. Planning when you'll next use. Looking forward to it getting you through the week. Feeling restless or irritable when it's not available.

You use more than you meant to. You tell yourself you'll have two drinks and you have six. You buy a gram and it's gone before you know it. The 'just this once' exception keeps happening.

You've tried to cut down and couldn't. Or you did cut down for a while, then went straight back to where you were. Or further.

You're secretive about how much you use. Hiding it from friends, family, partners. Lying about where the money went.

Using alone so nobody knows.

It's affecting your relationships. Arguments with people who care about you. Friendships drifting because your priorities have shifted. Choosing the substance over people.

It's affecting your responsibilities. Missing college or work. Falling behind on deadlines. Letting people down. Losing opportunities.

You've done things you regret while using. Said things you wouldn't normally say. Made decisions that weren't like you. Put yourself in danger.

You need more to feel the same effect. What used to get you where you wanted to be doesn't work anymore. Your tolerance has built up.

You feel off when you haven't used. Anxious, irritable, low, unable to sleep, unable to enjoy things. The substance has become your baseline.

You've kept using despite consequences. Even when it's caused problems, even when you've promised yourself you'd stop, even when it's hurt people you care about.

Read through that list again. Be honest with yourself. How many of those did you recognise?

The Question Behind the Question

When people ask "do I have a problem?," what they often really mean is "do I have a problem yet?" As in: has it got bad enough to count? Have I crossed the line into 'proper' addiction? Can I

still get away with carrying on like this?

But here's a different question. A harder one. A more useful one.

Is this taking me where I want to go?

Forget about labels. Forget about whether you qualify as an addict or whether you're as bad as someone else. Think about the person you want to become. The life you want to live. The relationships you want to have. The things you want to achieve.

Is your substance use helping you get there? Or is it pulling you in another direction?

That's not a question about whether you're an addict. It's a question about whether your choices are serving you. And it's one only you can answer.

Taking Stock

Before you move on, take some time with these questions. You don't have to write anything down if you don't want to. But try to answer them honestly, even if it's just in your own head.

1. When did your relationship with this substance change?
Was there a point when it stopped being something you did occasionally and started being something you needed?
2. What does it give you? Escape? Confidence? Connection? Relief? What need is it meeting?
3. What is it costing you? Not just money, but time, energy,

relationships, opportunities, self-respect?

4. If nothing changes, where do you see yourself in a year?
In five years?
5. What would need to happen for you to want to change?
And has some of it already happened?

You don't need to have all the answers right now. This is just the beginning of an honest conversation with yourself, one that might continue for a while. The fact that you're having it at all matters more than where it leads.

In the next chapter, we'll look more closely at what substance use might be costing you, beyond the obvious things. Because sometimes the biggest prices we pay are the ones we don't notice until later.

Ready to go deeper?

What you've just read is the opening of a book with no lectures, no labels, and no judgement — just clear information for working out where you actually stand, and what you want to do next.

- Eleven chapters across four parts — from honest looking to first steps toward change
- Written for ages 14–21, covering any substance
- Harm reduction treated as a real starting point — not just abstinence
- Who to talk to, and what help actually looks like

Get the full guide

stepwiserecovery.com/guides/foundations-edition

Available in paperback and digital — from £5.99

Our 1-in-10 Pledge. For every ten guides sold, we donate one to someone who can't afford it — through treatment centres and prison recovery programmes.

Need help right now?

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Narcotics Anonymous UK: 0300 999 1212 · SHOUT: text 85258

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