

## Self-Understanding of Substance Use

If you use a substance, the key is to understand *why*. No shame, no blame, no guilt, no “beating yourself up”—these all prevent you from understanding yourself.

Note, however, that *understanding* substance use does not mean *excusing* it. It does not mean that it was right or okay to use. Substance use is never a safe way of coping for someone who is in recovery from PTSD and substance abuse. Thus, “seek explanations but not excuses.”

Here are some ways to seek understanding about your substance use.

### **NOTICE THE CHOICE POINT**

**Every time you use, you make a decision to do so.** “Own” the decision—notice what you said to yourself to justify it. If you listen closely, every time you use a substance, you’ll hear a need that’s being neglected: a need for pleasure, connection, relaxation, love, celebration, symptom relief. Some examples: “When my friend passed the joint, I felt like I wanted to be part of things,” or “I saw the liquor store and said, ‘I’m stressed and just want one drink.’” These are all legitimate needs that deserve attention, but not with substances. Also, it may be helpful not to talk about your substance use as “slips” or “backsliding”—these make it sound as though they were accidents. Using a substance is never an accident; it is always a choice. Owning the choice can help you understand yourself and your needs.

**Explore your unconscious.** There may be times when you use and you truly do not know how it happened. Particularly for people who dissociate (which is common in PTSD), you may find yourself sitting at a bar with a drink in hand, not knowing how you got there. The best strategy for this is to explore what unconscious *part* of yourself led you to use. This is sometimes called the “Jekyll–Hyde personality” or the “split self”—there are feelings that you are having trouble letting yourself feel, and they sneak up and surprise you. For example, you may be having urges to use but denying them (“I shouldn’t feel this way, so I won’t let myself think about it”); or you may be angry but not fully aware of it (“I don’t have a right to be angry”). Just know that every time you use and are not conscious of it, you *can* become more conscious with effort. Here too, listen for unmet needs that require attention.

### **REPLAY THE SCENE IN SLOW MOTION**

**As if you are watching a movie in slow motion, describe everything that led up to using,** trying to understand what motivated you to use and being *really* honest with yourself:

Who were you with?

Where were you?

What happened that day?

What were you feeling and thinking?

What time was it?

What coping did you attempt?

What was the dialogue you went through, either with yourself or others?

**Now try to figure out a better way to cope next time**—replay the movie in slow motion, but this time with a better ending. Again, no shame or blame—just identify how you can treat yourself better next time. Look at the Safe Coping Skills list to identify better solutions.

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For example, if you used because . . .

You felt upset . . . then talk to someone.

You can't sleep at night . . . then talk to a doctor who specializes in sleep problems.

Your sister just died and you miss her . . . then let yourself cry and mourn the loss.

### **EXPLORE THE MEANING OF YOUR SUBSTANCE USE**

***For people with PTSD, substance use can have many meanings.*** Substance use can be a way of getting to sleep, numbing the pain, giving you control, helping you feel accepted by people, committing slow suicide, getting back at an abuser, crying out for help, showing others how much pain you feel, blotting out memories, accessing memories . . . or many other meanings. Each time you use, try to understand the meaning.

### **NOTICE THE COST**

***Just as there's "no free lunch," there is no free substance use.*** Both emotionally and financially, substance use has a cost. Using may feel good for a few minutes or hours, but you'll pay the cost later. Think about the *interpersonal costs* (who is it hurting?); the *financial costs* (is this a good use of your money?); and the *emotional costs* (how will it make you feel about yourself?).

### **NOTICE HOW YOU RELATE TO YOURSELF AFTER USING**

***Many people with PTSD "beat themselves up" after using.*** They attack, reject, shame, and yell at themselves. This prevents growth because you're not able to hear, with an open heart and open mind, your needs and motivations for using. Another destructive pattern is perfectionism: If you use once, you harshly view it as failure and so keep on using, turning 1 drink into 10. Notice the voice in your head after you use: Is it the voice of someone who is kind and caring? Or harsh and judgmental? (And does the voice remind you of anyone who treated you harshly when you were growing up?)

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