

# “Why Youth Use & Don’t Use Substances” Brainstorm

**Recommended Age: 14+**

## Goals

- To brainstorm reasons why teens may or may not be using substances.
- To link youth to local resources where they can get help.

## Have Ready

- Write “Why do youth use substances?” and “Why don’t youth use substances?” at the top of flipchart paper or a whiteboard.
- Markers.

## Activity Introduction

- In this activity, we ask youth what are the reasons for using or not using substances. But first we ask, **“What exactly are ‘substances’?”** Substances are things that we put into our bodies that change how we feel, think, and experience the world around us or how our body acts. **“What are some legal ones?”** Coffee, nicotine (cigarettes if 18), marijuana (if 19), over-the-counter medications such as Tylenol, prescription drugs (intended to be taken by the person they are prescribed to in the recommended dosage), and alcohol (if over 18). **“What are some illegal ones?”** Ecstasy, cocaine, meth, etc.
- Mention that this is not an activity about whether it is right or wrong to use certain substances or a time where we share stories about drug use. We are not assuming anyone is using substances or not, and we are not judging anyone for whatever choices they make. Everyone deserves respect and support, whether they choose to use substances or not.
- Hand out the flipcharts and ask youth to write down their ideas. Give the groups about 5 or 10 minutes to work on their flipcharts (see sample flipcharts below).

## Instructions

- This exercise can be done in small groups and/or as a large group brainstorm where you write their responses on a flipchart or whiteboard.
- Ask youth, “**Why do youth use?**” and “**Why don’t youth use?**”

## Sample Flipcharts

### Why do youth use?

- Chill out/relax
- Deal with stress
- Addiction
- Media influences
- Curious
- **Mental health issues**
- Trauma
- Fun/like it
- Be social
- **Peer pressure**
- Family is using
- **Help cope/forget problems**
- Health purposes

### Why don’t youth use?

- Past experience
- Values
- Substance use by friends or family
- Fear of overdosing
- Worry about addiction
- Don’t like hangovers
- **Are driving**
- **Are pregnant**
- Focus on sports/academics
- **Future goals**
- Worry about getting in trouble
- Don’t want to make impaired decisions/look foolish or stupid
- Worry about being vulnerable/assaulted

## Debrief

- Go over the flipcharts with the group; add the bolded responses if not already added by youth.
- Looking at the lists, we can see that there are many reasons youth have for using or not using substances.
- For some youth, substance use is for fun or to experiment. Having said that, we can also see that some youth are using to cope or deal with problems or trauma.
- Debrief mental health issues, trauma, to cope with problems, or addiction by acknowledging that this is a reality for some youth, and talking about appropriate resources (e.g., talking about it with

someone they trust and asking for help from a guidance counsellor, teacher, addictions worker, knowledge keeper, Elder, family member, or other trusted adult).

- Debrief peer pressure by talking about refusal skills (e.g., things youth can say in a party situation to refuse alcohol or drugs like I'm driving; I have to babysit later; I have a big game/test tomorrow; I'll get in trouble with my family; Somebody has to watch out for the rest of you, etc.).
- Debrief pregnancy by talking about refusal skills, ways to support someone who is pregnant, and abstinence activities.
- **Reiterate that everyone deserves respect and support, whether they choose to use substances or not.**

## Additional Activities

Ideally, this activity can be followed by:

- Risk Line-Up Game with Harm Reduction
- Refusal Skills Brainstorm
- Abstinence Activities Scenario Cards & Brainstorm