

Supporting Patients with Addictive Behaviours

Providing compassionate approaches to addiction

As a healthcare professional, you play a crucial role in supporting the clinical needs of individuals living with substance dependencies or addictive behaviours. We recognise the complexities involved in treating these conditions and are here to support you in providing integrated, holistic care.

Many individuals experience deep shame surrounding their alcohol use, substance use, gambling, or other addictive behaviours. This stigma can make it difficult for them to seek help, regardless of where they are in their recovery journey. Your approach as a healthcare provider can significantly influence their willingness to engage in support services.

Best practices for engaging patients

When discussing substance use or addictive behaviours with patients, consider the following best practices:



Use person-first language

Patients are people first. Prioritising person-centred terms like “person who uses drugs” rather than defining individuals by their behaviour or diagnosis can positively influence their recovery.¹



Encourage support & choice

Learn how a patient identifies and connect them with inclusive support services that complement your day-to-day clinical work with them.



Respectful communication

Language includes more than words; tone and body language also impact engagement. Be mindful of how you hold yourself and approach the conversation.



Stay updated & evidence-based

Terminology evolves, so use the most recent, consensus-based, and evidence-supported language to avoid outdated, harmful, or misleading terms.



Empowerment & accuracy

Use strengths-based language that supports harm minimisation and self-management principles and ensures factual and respectful communication.

If you apply these core principals to your practice, you can support a **stronger relationship with your patients with trust and honest communication at the core.**

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Practical tips for stigma-free conversations

1. Reframe the narrative:

Instead of:	“Why don’t you just quit?”
Try:	“What challenges are you facing, and how can we support you?”
Instead of:	“You have a problem with addiction.”
Try:	“You are facing a challenge, and recovery is possible.”

2. Avoid moral judgments:

Treat substance use disorders like other chronic health conditions, such as diabetes, arthritis or cardiovascular disease.

3. Encourage hope and recovery:

Reinforce that setbacks are part of the process and that recovery is achievable with the right tools and support.

4. Foster a safe and open environment:

Ask open-ended questions to encourage dialogue, such as “What does recovery mean to you?” Offer reassurance that seeking help is a sign of strength, not weakness.

5. Provide practical resources:

Share information about SMART Recovery meetings and self-help tools. Guide clients toward additional mental health and social support services.

3,000+ SMART meetings in over 35 countries

SMART Recovery is the world’s largest community of free mutual aid group meetings that use science and self-empowerment to help people manage addictive behaviours including drugs, alcohol, gambling, food, excessive shopping, phone use, gaming and more.

Over 30,000 people are supported every week through 3,000+ meetings running across 35 countries, including Australia, Canada, UK and USA.²

Help destigmatise recovery conversations

By shifting the language and approach around addiction, healthcare professionals can play a pivotal role in supporting positive change. Integrate SMART Recovery’s evidence-based methods into your practice to promote compassionate, effective, and stigma-free support.



How SMART Recovery can support your patients

SMART Recovery (Self-Management and Recovery Training) is a free, secular, group-based program that combines professional clinicians and peer navigators to foster mutual support for individuals facing addictive behaviours. Through facilitated discussions, participants gain practical tools and shared experiences to guide their recovery journey.^{3,4}

Grounded in the philosophy of harm minimisation, SMART Recovery acknowledges that while risks cannot always be entirely eliminated, individuals can set realistic, achievable goals. By empowering participants with the power of choice, SMART serves as a valuable complement to the essential care GPs provide within their communities.

Beyond its core program, SMART Recovery offers specialised support tailored to priority populations:



Youth SMART

Designed for young people managing substance use and behavioural challenges.



Yarn SMART

A culturally safe space for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.



CALD SMART

Inclusive recovery options for Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) communities.



Family & Friends SMART

Support for loved ones of individuals in recovery, helping them maintain their own well-being.



Additional programs

Tailored support for justice-involved individuals, neurodivergent and LGBTIQ+ Australians, Veterans, and First Responders.

SMART Recovery seamlessly integrates with existing Alcohol and Other Drug (AOD) services, providing an accessible, stigma-free pathway to recovery. By incorporating SMART into patient care, GPs and healthcare professionals can offer a structured, evidence-based support system that meets the diverse needs of their patients.⁴



For more resources and to refer clients to SMART Recovery:

Visit smartrecoveryaustralia.com.au

Contact us at smartrecovery@srau.org.au

Together, we can build a healthcare system that prioritises science-backed recovery resulting in patient-powered success

1. Broyles, L. M., Binswanger, I. A., Jenkins, J. A., Finnell, D. S., Faseru, B., Cavaiaola, A., et al. (2014). Confronting Inadvertent Stigma and Pejorative Language in Addiction Scholarship: A Recognition and Response. *Substance Abuse*, 35(3), 217-221.

2. Data on File.

3. Gray RM, et al. 2020. A qualitative exploration of SMART Recovery meetings in Australia and the role of a digital platform to support routine outcome monitoring. *Addict Behav*. doi:10.1016/j.addbeh.2019.106144

4. Beck et al. 2023. The benefits and challenges of virtual SMART recovery mutual-help groups: Participant and facilitator perspectives. *Int J Drug Policy*. 2023;120:104174. doi:10.1016/j.drugpo.