

HANDOUT 4: DRUG AND ALCOHOL PROBLEMS

In the aftermath of a disaster, some people increase their use of **alcohol or other substances**. This may include **prescription or over-the-counter medications**, such as those prescribed for mental health problems (e.g., anxiety), physical health problems (e.g., back pain), and sleep problems. It is very important to follow the dosage instructions recommended by your physician for any prescribed medications, as some people may over-use prescription medications in response to a traumatic event such as a disaster.

If your use of alcohol, drugs, or prescription medications has **increased** following the disaster, it may be a sign of related problems. Some people increase use to try to **avoid** thinking about what happened or take away the strong negative feelings like anxiety, sadness, guilt, or anger. Even though using alcohol, medications, and other substances may help you **escape** those feelings in the short run, they can actually make these feelings worse in the long run. This **boomerang effect** is also true for people who use alcohol or drugs to help with sleep problems, which are common after a disaster. Although they may seem helpful at first, these substances can interfere with your body's ability to sleep well, which often leads to even more sleep problems.

For people with a history of alcohol or other substance use problems who are in recovery, experiencing a disaster can result in strong urges to use again and **relapse**. People who were once able to control their drinking or drug use may have greater difficulty doing so since the disaster. For the same reasons described above, using substances to reduce the negative reactions to the disaster can provide temporary relief, but usually backfires in the long run.

HOW CAN I ADDRESS MY DRUG AND ALCOHOL PROBLEMS?

Pay close attention to any change in your use of alcohol and/or drugs. Consider tracking your drug and alcohol use by writing it down. This will help you to accurately measure how often you are relying on drugs and alcohol. Here are some additional tips:

- Use all prescription and over-the-counter medications as indicated. Consult your doctor with questions about these medications and their interactions.
- Realize that you may be using to cope with other symptoms.
- Use coping skills and other strategies you will learn in this intervention to cope with strong emotions instead of relying on drugs and/or alcohol.
- Connect with your social supports, including friends, family, and romantic partner.
- Utilize community resources for addiction problems such as Alcoholics Anonymous or Rational Recovery, if needed.

If you believe you have a serious problem with substance use, talk to your therapist about it. If appropriate, they may be able to refer you to specialized counseling for your substance use.