

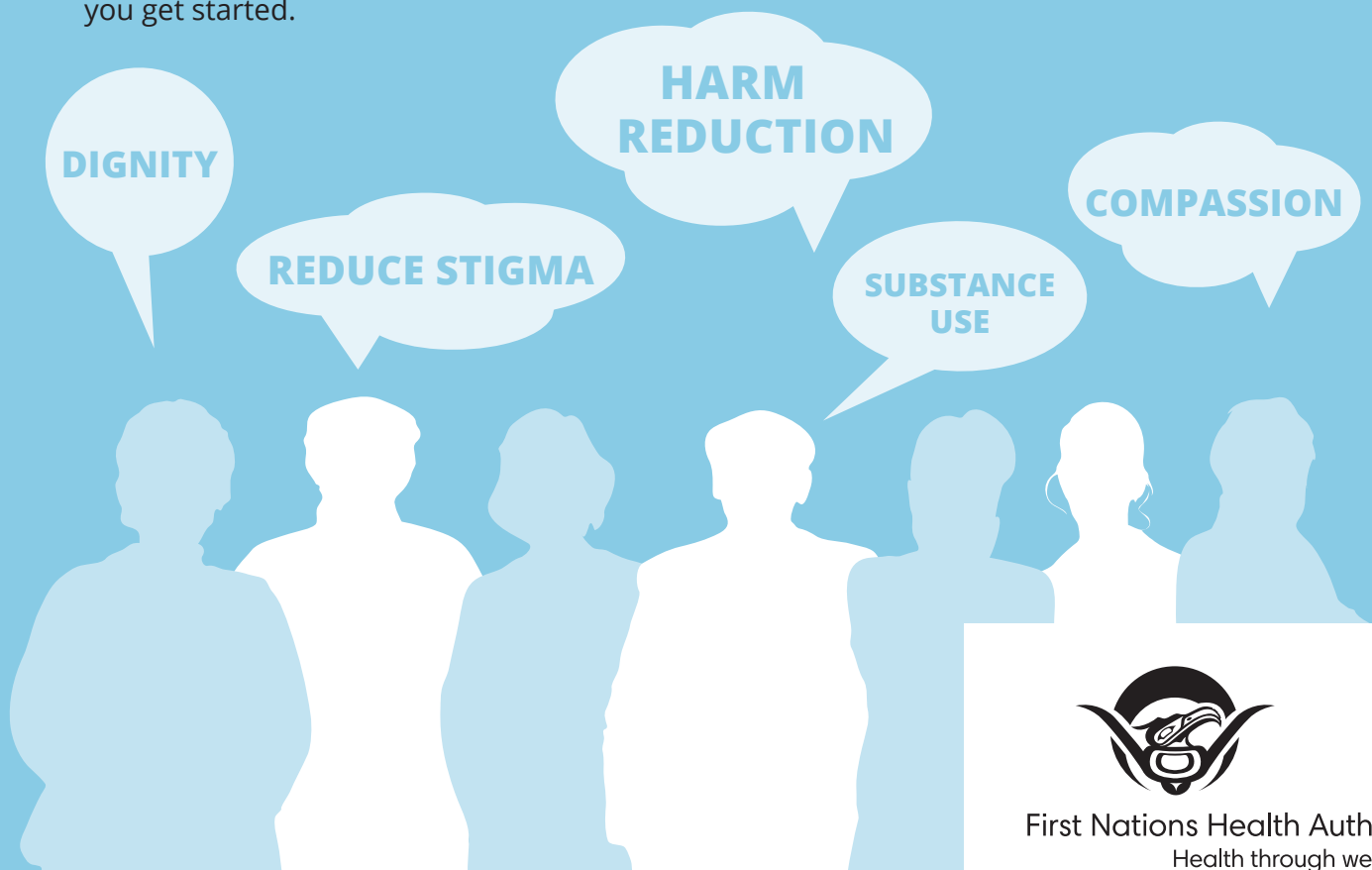
TALKING ABOUT SUBSTANCE USE

Substance use can be a difficult topic to discuss with family, friends, colleagues, strangers and often those closest to us. Talking about substance use brings up many thoughts, feelings, opinions and memories – good and bad.

Using stigmatizing language, shame or judgment is usually hurtful and makes it almost impossible to have constructive conversations with the people in our lives that use substances.

To become a safe person to talk with, use extra care and respect, come from a place of empathy, and remember that all people deserve human rights and dignity, including people who use substances. Let them know that you care about them and that you value their life.

When we are supporting people who are using substances, it is important to focus on building relationships based on safety and trust. You can be an important connection for someone in your life who is using substances. Beginning that conversation is a crucial first step. There is no perfect formula for having these conversations. This list of Do's and Don'ts is here to help you get started.



DO'S

- DO** talk with people about something other than their substance use. Take a more holistic approach to engaging in conversations.
- DO** talk about addiction and substance use as a healing journey instead of it being a choice. Addiction is not a choice. It's much more complicated than "just saying no."
- DO** include people using substances in conversations and activities as often as possible, just as you would anyone else. Inclusion and belonging are good sources of medicine.
- DO** prepare to meet people where they are at instead of telling them where they should be at. People who struggle with addictions know their addictions affect everyone around them.
- DO** take time to learn about addiction and substance use. Talk to a counsellor or do your own research.
- DO** use person-first language like "people who use drugs" or, for people who have engaged in substance use in the past, "people with lived experience." Person-first language is respectful, maintains a person's dignity and shows compassion.

DON'TS

- DON'T** focus the conversation solely on addiction. People are not their addictions or their behaviours. Addiction is just one part of life and it's important to focus on all the things that bring us joy, purpose and meaning.
- DON'T** tell people to "clean-up" or just "get sober." Avoid focusing the conversation on rehab and detox. These are overwhelming and unrealistic approaches to addiction and wellness. These approaches are judgmental and will not result in an opportunity for connection.
- DON'T** segregate or isolate people using substances or make relationships with them conditional. Doing this is hurtful and often leads to increased substance use.
- DON'T** give people using substances demands or try and guilt them with statements such as, "If you really loved me, you would stop using."
- DON'T** believe everything you see or hear about substance use on social media or television. There are a lot of myths, assumptions and incorrect statements. Take the time evaluate what is a commonly held belief that may not be true.
- DON'T** use stigmatizing language like "drug user," "drug addict," "clean" or other harmful terms. These terms reduce people to a single behaviour when they are so much more than that.