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HSC Public Health Agency
Project supported by the PIA


Safeguarding Children Affected by Problem Parental Substance Use (“Hidden Harm”)



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Housekeeping

- Microphones
- Breaks
- Internet connections
- Confidentiality
- Questions/comments




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Course Objectives

By the end of today, you will be able to:

- Identify how substance use impacts the individual, their children, and family
- Understand what hidden harm is and the impact it has locally
- Understand the concept of resilience and be aware of risk and protective factors




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Course Objectives

By the end of today, you will be able to:

- Identify signs to look out for and when to seek help
- Understand strategies and messages to reduce harm
- Identify local services available



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1 **Introduction**

Why do people use substances, and what is problematic use?

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Why do people use substances?
Think of some reasons why people might use alcohol or other drugs.

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Relieving tension/anxiety/form of escapism

Boredom

Dependency

Availability



Social norms and/or peer pressure

Rituals

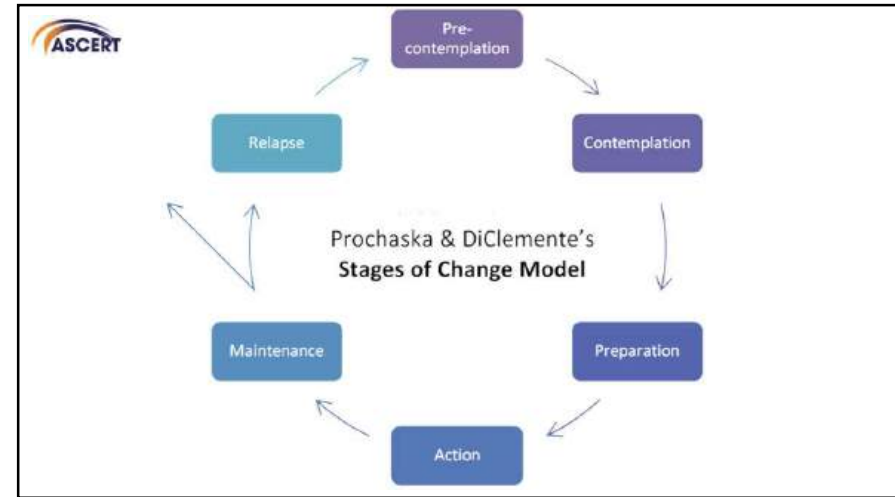
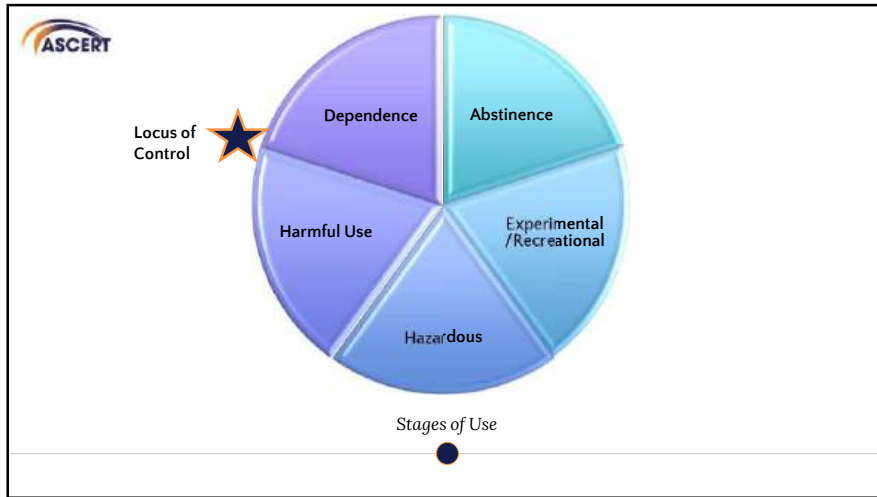
Rebellion

Self-medication

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How much is too much?
How would you define "problematic use", and how does it differ from dependence?



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2 **Problem Parental Substance Use and Hidden Harm**

How might problem parental substance use affect a child?

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Problem Parental Substance Use (PPSU)

- Impact of PPSU on children/young people may not be directly correlated to amount or frequency of the substance use
- Knowing about the amount of substances used can help us understand the impact on the parent as an individual
 - Shouldn't be taken as an indicator of harm without assessing parenting skills


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“Hidden harm” is defined as children/young people with [one or more] parent(s) or carer(s) whose alcohol [and/or] drug use (including over-the-counter and prescribed medication) has a serious negative consequence for themselves and those around them.

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Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland

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The image features a large blue iceberg floating in the ocean. The tip of the iceberg is above the water line, while the much larger, jagged base is submerged below the surface. Surrounding the iceberg are several small, square inset photographs showing various scenes of family distress: a woman looking down sadly, a child with a shocked expression, a woman covering her face, a man shouting, and a family in a tense interaction.

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Hidden Harm




The photograph shows a family in a domestic setting. A man and a woman are standing and appear to be in a heated argument, with their hands raised. In the foreground, a young girl and a young boy are sitting at a table, looking downcast and distressed.

- How much of an issue do you think this is in Northern Ireland?
- What substances are you seeing that you're the most worried about?

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Hidden Harm in Northern Ireland

- Limited information on the exact impact of problem parental drug (PPDU) and alcohol (PPAU) use
- In 2010, the Public Health Agency reported that
 - An estimated 40,000 young people in NI are living with PPAU
 - 40% of children on the Child Protection Register and 70% of Looked After Children are there due to PPAU




The photograph shows a family of four standing together. A man and a woman are on either side of a young child, who is holding a red and white plaid shirt. They all appear to be smiling and looking towards the camera.

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Hidden Harm in Northern Ireland

- In 2023/24, 12% of clients on the NI Substance Misuse Database said they lived with dependent children
 - SMD only looks at people who present to services (1) for the first time or (2) for the first time in 6 months
 - Approximately 477 households



Department of Health (2024)

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When Harm is Hidden

Fixers UK; https://youtu.be/zzRR_5_SNb8

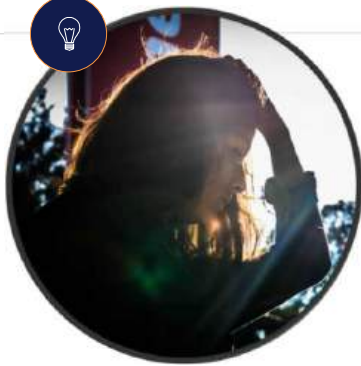
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It Was My Normal (Part 1)

ASCERT; <https://youtu.be/U7eoXtcWtqE?si=xi4NfmEuoQCFIqjSd>


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What is the experience of hidden harm?

Listen to Laura's Story and pay attention to how she describes her experience of living in a household with problem parental alcohol use.

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Laura's Story


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What did you hear **Laura** say?

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 **Living with Hidden Harm:**
Laura's Story



- Ruined 5th/6th birthday party
- Does housework most of the time
- Relationship breakdown
- Difficulty with food/eating
- Happy in school but doesn't want teachers to know about the situation – "it's embarrassing"
- Missing school
- Money issues
- Self-harm

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What are the potential **signs** of **PPSU/hidden harm**?

In small groups, think about signs/indicators you might notice in the children and parents you work with that may suggest they're living with problem parental substance use.

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Possible Emotional/Behavioural Effects of Hidden Harm


- Increased likelihood of emotional and behavioural disorders
- Shame, anxiety, guilt, anger
- Increased risk of engagement in criminality
- Increased risk of substance misuse
- Early initiation of sexual activity



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Possible Physical Effects of Hidden Harm


- Dealing with physical changes of puberty alone
- Physical consequences of stress
- Domestic violence/abuse and neglect
- Physical issues associated with own substance use
- STIs and pregnancy
- An unkempt appearance



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Possible Social Effects of Hidden Harm


- Isolation/trouble fitting in
- Bullying
- Decreased school attendance
- Lack of usual opportunities (e.g. work)
- Withdrawal from normally-trusted figures
- Negative interactions with police and other authority figures



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Possible Environmental Effects of Hidden Harm

- Having to take on the role of primary carer
- Poverty
- Lack of parental interaction, supervision, and appropriate discipline
- Unstable/chaotic household
- Frequent changes in housing arrangements (e.g. foster care; kinship care)




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3 Handling Cases of PPSU/Hidden Harm

What do we do when we suspect problem parental substance use or hidden harm?

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What action(s) would you take?
 In small groups, look at a case scenario and decide what action(s) you would take: do nothing; speak to a line manager/designated CPO, speak with Gateway Team for advice, and/or refer to Family Support Hub.

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Approaching Issues of PPSU - Parents

- Convey a desire to understand the reasons behind the behaviour
- Resist judgement or trying to change their thoughts about substance use
- Discuss observable facts and substantiated concerns rather than assuming harms or jumping to conclusions
- Help the parent understand the impact their use has on their children



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Approaching Issues of PPSU - Young People



- Express curiosity about how life is at home for the young person but do not judge or criticise their parent's behaviour
- Empathise and reassure
- Speak about other young people that may be similarly affected
- If a young person is not ready to talk about PPSU, suggest they may in the future, or leave further information with them

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Messages Young People Need to Hear



- You are not alone
- You are not to blame
- You are not betraying anyone by talking about it
- Your opinion matters
- You can still have a good life despite your parent's continued substance use
- There are people who can help you

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4 Resilience and Risk/Protective Factors

How can resilience help a young person affected by hidden harm?

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Resilience is the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats, or significant sources of stress...it means 'bouncing back' from difficult experiences.

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Resilience: Risk and Protective Factors

Risk Factors

- Factors that add to the likelihood of a child experiencing significant harm; undermine resilience
- Example: social isolation

Protective Factors


- Factors that reduce or prevent the impact of a risk factor; support resilience
- Example: close relationship with a stable, sober adult

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What are some risk and protective factors regarding substance use-related harm?
 In small groups, think about risk and protective factors within individuals, families, and communities.

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Examples of Protective Factors Supporting Resilience in Hidden Harm Situations

- Presence of a stable adult figure (esp. a parent not using substances)
- Close positive bond with an adult in a caring role
- Wider positive support network (incl. with peers)
- Parenting style and positive family environment
- Individual temperament
- A good repertoire of coping responses
- Ability to cope with change
- Engagement in a range of activities
- Self-efficacy, self-esteem, confidence
- Problem solving skills
- Positive opportunities at times of transition

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5 Signposting
 Who's available to help?

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Local Hidden Harm Services

STEPS  COPE
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- For young people 11 – 25 affected by a parent/carer's problem substance use and/or mental health difficulty
- One-to-one support
- All Trust areas
- stc@ascert.biz



It Was My **Normal** (Part 2)

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Local Hidden Harm Services

Barnardos START360

Pharos and VOICES

- For young people and families affected by problem substance use in the family
 - Therapeutic individual, group, and family work
- Referral typically comes from social services or addictions services
 - Pharos: Belfast, South Eastern, and Southern Trusts
 - VOICES: Northern and Western Trusts

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NIDACTS

Northern Ireland Drug and Alcohol Coordination Teams

drugsandalcoholni.info



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Family Support NI

familysupportni.gov.uk

A directory of various support services (e.g. mental health, finances) and registered childcare services in NI



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Steps to Cope Online Intervention

A self-guided, evidence-based intervention for young people living with hidden harm

stepstocope.co.uk





Thanks!

Any questions?

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