



## Unmasking Risk Factors Behind the Substance Abuse: A Qualitative Exploration

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**Abstract:** The objective of the current study was to explore the risk factors of substance abuse among university students. Using a qualitative approach, this study applied thematic analysis to examine the underlying. Population of the research was students at University of Gujrat. Purposive sampling technique was used to select the sample size. In the present study, in-depth interviews were conducted with 15 diagnosed males using a semi-structured interview guide. The results were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to find out the risk factors of substance abuse among university students. The emic, etic and empirical data was elaborated, and seven main themes and further subthemes were made which clearly elaborate the risk factors of using substance. Thematic analysis was done to get all the possible results.

**Key Words:** Substance Abuse, Risk Factors, Thematic Analysis

### Introduction

The shift to college is an important time in a person's life as it encompasses many new levels of independence, social influences, and academic pressures (Skidmore et al., 2016). With this independence, comes substance use - whether it be alcohol, cannabis or the non-medical use of prescription drugs - which is an important and ubiquitous public health issue found on college campuses around the world (Welsh et al., 2019). While the body of quantitative epidemiological studies suggest there is a high prevalence of substance use - especially binge drinking - there is little understanding of the reasons and experiences, or the meaning behind substance use (Doraiswamy et al., 2020).

Substance abuse, defined here as the harmful or hazardous use of psychoactive substances - including alcohol and illicit drugs - is an important public health issue affecting young adults and university students (Görgülü et al., 2016; Griffin et al., 2025). The transition to university life often entails a number of changes, and can cause newly-found independence, new social situations, increased academic pressure, and in some cases, a freedom from parental oversight (Gasa et al., 2022; Alkhaldeh et al., 2023). This combination of circumstances can present opportunities for increased engagement in risky behaviour making university students a uniquely prone demographic for experimenting with and misusing substances (Blows & Isaacs, 2022). The negative effects of substance use in this population are severe and yet expansive, resulting in lowered education performance, engaging in high-risk sexual behavior, physical and mental health difficulties, legal consequences, and increasing the chance of long-term dependence (Gasa et al., 2022). To remediate the issue, it is essential to understand the various layers of risk factors that lead individuals to engage in substance use in the student population. Risk factors can typically be identified and categorized across individual, family, friend, and environmental domains. By establishing the presence of these factors, we can develop prevention and intervention initiatives that are tailored to promote well-being and facilitate success (Alhammad et al., 2022).

Objective, research demonstrates numerous primary risk-focused domains that influence college and university substance use:

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**Individual and Psychological Factors:** Higher levels of stress and academic orientation encourage students to use a substance as a coping strategy. High risk factors include the existence of unreported or diagnosed mental health disorders, such as But not limited to depression, anxiety, and ADHD increases individual possibilities to engage in substance misuse, as students often self-medicate to relieve symptoms (Gasa et al., 2022; Pedrelli et al., 2015).

**Peer and Social Factors:** Peer pressure and being part of a friendship group have been reported to be prominent or good factors for initiating substance use, so initiation can occur through the lens of fitting in (Gasa et al., 2022; Liu et al., 2023).

The campus environment and social norms, "party culture" or being part of clubs or organizations, for example, will often normalize substance use, and potentially encourage it (Welsh et al., 2019; Gasa et al., 2022).

**Family Factors:** Family history of substance use increases the genetic and environmental risk for students. Additionally, there is an increased risk for students with a lack of parental supervision or having a weak relationship with their parents when they were younger (Connery et al., 2020; Gasa et al., 2022).

**Environmental Factors:** The availability and accessibility of substances in or around campus along with the new indecisions of living away from home (barriers are removed) increases the opportunity to use (Gasa et al., 2022; Connery et al., 2020).

The misuse of substances in university students is a widespread public health issue globally and is detrimental to academic performance and personal wellbeing, as well as to the health of society. The time period is an academic environment, with academic pressure, as well as the opportunity to experiment, meet new groups of friends, and increase indecisions, is common in the period of transition of university education and life. Even though this problem is becoming more well recognized, there is still a dearth of context-specific information on the prevalence and psychosocial risk factors that contribute to drug misuse among college students, especially in developing nations. Cultural and socioeconomic environments might have significant differences in risk variables such peer pressure, academic stress, psychological suffering, family history, and drug accessibility. Therefore, creating health education and policy programs that are both successful and culturally appropriate requires a careful examination of these factors. Furthermore, the results can form the basis of next longitudinal research and treatments aimed at lowering drug use and the negative effects it causes in emerging people in educational environments.

### Objectives of research

- ▶ The objective is to find out the risk factors of substance abuse among university students.

### Research Design

Qualitative research design was used to find out the risk factors of substance abuse among university students. The target population was students who were involved in drug addiction and often consume variety of drugs. Sampling frame was obtained from the population that was separated from screening tool that consume drugs. The study involved conducting 15 in-depth interviews to explore personal experiences and contextual factors related to substance abuse among university students.

### Inclusion criteria

Students that were screened out as drug addicts and they were voluntarily consented to participate and demonstrated a willingness to share their experiences for the current research.

### Exclusion criteria

Students that were not screened out as drug addicts or they were not willing to participate

### Instruments

A semi-structured interview guide was developed by the researcher and utilized to conduct interviews with the participants, ensuring consistency while allowing flexibility to explore emerging themes in depth.



## Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to identify and interpret underlying risk factors associated with substance abuse among university students. This method facilitated a systematic examination of recurring patterns and themes within the qualitative data, following the six-phase framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006).

## Procedure

For the qualitative research the participants who were willing to give interviews and feel free to communicate about their problems and usage of drugs were separated out. An interview guide was made by the researcher which include different question and with the consent of the participant the audio was recorded and the participants were assured that their identity and answers was kept anonymous and that any questions they had regarding any assertion in the questions were addressed 15 participants gave the interview and thematic Analysis was done by making themes, sub-themes, initial codes and by generating emic, etic and empirical data. and the results was reported accurately.

## Data Analysis

The interviews were taken and recorded and later on the themes were generated from those interviews to analyses the final report which measure the prevalence rate and risk factors of substance abuse among university students.

## Ethical Consideration

Before the start of data collection American Psychological Association (APA) ethical guidelines were followed for permission, inform consent, privacy and confidentiality. The scales were used after receiving prior permission from the author via email. Participant's confidentiality and anonymity was maintained. Participant have complete choice to withdraw from the study at any time.

## Thematic Analysis

Interviews were transcribed and coded. The results were subdivided into main themes, sub themes and codes. The codes were divided into two different categories. Each category of code was groped under a sub theme and a final main theme evolved from these sub themes. The present data explored seven key themes in the study; initiation of drugs, Experience with drug, consequence of drugs, roble to quit realization and regret, pathways to recovery and advice to other.

**Table 1**

*Themes, Subthemes, Emic, Etic, and Empirical Voices from Thematic Analysis*

Theme	Subtheme	Emic Perspective (Participants' Voices)	Etic Perspective (Researcher's Interpretation)	Empirical Evidence (Direct Quotes)
Initiation of Drug Use	Academic and Study Pressure	"Stress of assignments and exams made me light a cigarette."	Academic burden is a significant catalyst for initial drug use.	"Assignments, quizzes, exams... smoking gave temporary relief."
	Peer Pressure and Social Acceptance	"I wanted to be part of the rich group, so I started vaping."	Peer acceptance motivates risky behaviors like drug initiation.	"Most of the rich kids smoked; I wanted to fit in."
	Emotional Trauma (Breakups, Family Issues)	"After my breakup, I felt alone and turned to drugs."	Emotional disturbances trigger substance uses as a coping mechanism.	"My girlfriend left me, and that's when I ruined myself."

Theme	Subtheme	Emic Perspective (Participants' Voices)	Etic Perspective (Researcher's Interpretation)	Empirical Evidence (Direct Quotes)
Experiences with Drug Use	Initial Relief and Calmness	"It felt like my problems disappeared, even if for a while."	Initial drug use brings short-term emotional relief but reinforces dependency.	"I felt peaceful the first time I used it."
	Increase in Usage Over Time	"First occasionally, then daily, now many times a day."	Progressive addiction cycle noted among users.	"Initially it was once, now I need it daily to survive."
	Physical and Mental Dependence	"If I don't smoke, I get headaches and restless."	Dependence manifests both physically and psychologically.	"Without it, I feel irritated, anxious, and weak."
Consequences of Drug Use	Academic Decline	"I stopped attending classes and my grades dropped."	Substance use negatively impacts educational attainment.	"My academic performance has dropped a lot."
	Health Deterioration	"My sleep is disturbed and my health is getting worse."	Physical health issues like insomnia and weakness are common.	"I feel tired all the time; my heartbeat gets fast."
	Isolation from Family and Friends	"My family noticed my behavior but I lied to them."	Addiction fosters social isolation and relationship strain.	"I drifted away from good friends."
Struggle to Quit	Multiple Failed Attempts	"I tried quitting many times but kept relapsing."	Quitting is complicated by withdrawal symptoms and emotional triggers.	"It's easy to start, but it's a lifetime struggle to quit."
	Withdrawal Symptoms	"When I try to quit, I get extreme anxiety and headaches."	Withdrawal symptoms discourage sustained abstinence.	"Without it, I become irritable and can't sleep."
	Fear of Lifelong Addiction	"I feel I've gone too far; maybe I can't quit now."	Addiction leads to a loss of hope and perceived helplessness.	"I think I can't get rid of this habit even if I want to."
Realization and Regret	Awareness of Self-Destruction	"I realized I am ruining my life."	Participants express insight into the harmful effects of their behavior.	"Every day I regret starting this habit."
	Emotional Guilt Towards Parents	"When I see my parents' pain, I feel ashamed."	Guilt towards family becomes a major source of emotional distress.	"Seeing my mother cry broke me inside."
Pathways to Recovery	Role of Positive Friends/Family Support	"If someone truly supports me, I can quit."	Emotional and social support critical for recovery.	"Good friends and family can save you from this hell."
	Need for Professional Help	"A psychologist can guide me out of this."	Professional intervention significantly aids rehabilitation.	"Talking to a psychologist helped me understand myself better."
	Importance of Self-Awareness and Motivation	"I must admit I need help to recover."	Recovery starts with self-realization and internal motivation.	"First step is accepting that it's a disease."



Theme	Subtheme	Emic Perspective (Participants' Voices)	Etic Perspective (Researcher's Interpretation)	Empirical Evidence (Direct Quotes)
Advice to Others	Avoiding Peer Pressure	"Say no to bad company."	Peer resistance is vital to prevention.	"Don't try to fit in by harming yourself."
	Seeking Help Early	"Talk to someone before it's too late."	Early intervention prevents deepening of addiction.	"Seek help before you waste your life."
	Valuing Life and Health	"Life is precious; don't waste it."	Focus on the long-term consequences promotes healthier choices.	"Handle stress positively; your health matters most."

### Main Theme One: Initiation of Drug

The initiation of drug use among university students is a complex and multi-dimensional phenomenon. Each subtheme reveals distinct pathways through which students are introduced to substance use, reflecting a combination of personal vulnerability and environmental stressors.

#### Sub Theme One: Academic and Study Pressure

University life often represents a critical transition period, under this pressure, some students turned to substances like cigarettes, vapes, and cannabis as a means to manage stress, stay awake for long hours, or calm their nerves. The following statement is in which the participant discusses the academic and study pressure.

*"I used to feel stressed due to assignments and exams. Some people said smoking gives relief." (participant 1, p2, line 43-44)*

Another respondent added that

*"We had so many projects, assignments, and exams that I couldn't sleep at night." (participant 3, p4, line 127-129)*

In the context of this study, it is evident that academic stress is not merely an isolated pressure, but an overwhelming and continuous burden that leads students to seek immediate but unhealthy relief mechanisms.

#### Sub Theme Two; Peer Pressure and Social Acceptance

Another powerful force influencing drug initiation is peer pressure and the desire for social acceptance. The following statement is given by participants in this regard.

*"Most students at university came from rich families. They wore expensive clothes and seemed very confident. I wanted to be like them and be a part of their group." (participant 4, p7, line 194-196)*

*"At first I refused many times, but after constant insistence and being made fun of, I gave it a try." (participant 8, p13, line 411-413)*

Thus, social identity formation and peer validation become critical risk factors in the onset of substance use among university students.

#### Sub Theme Three; Emotional Trauma (Breakups, Family Issues)

The third significant pathway to drug use initiation uncovered was emotional trauma, stemming from personal losses such as romantic breakups or conflict-ridden family environments.

*"It all started when my girlfriend suddenly left me. That loneliness and depression pushed me toward drugs." (participant 2, p3, line 73-74)*

*"My home environment has always been tense. My parents fight a lot, and their problems affected me mentally." (participant 5, p8, line 237-239)*

*"I couldn't talk to them about my problems. I felt like a stranger in my own home." (participant 7, p12, line 346-348)*



This highlights how unresolved emotional trauma, whether rooted in intimate relationships or family dynamics, is a potent driver of substance use initiation.

### **Main Theme Two; Experiences with Drug Use**

The progression from initial drug experimentation to habitual use involves a range of psychological and physical experiences.

#### **Sub Theme One; Initial Relief and Calmness**

For many participants, the first experiences with drug use brought a strong sense of temporary relief, peace, and emotional numbness. The following statement is given by participants in this regard.

*"At first, it felt like all my worries disappeared, even if just for a while." (participant 5, p25, line233-235)*

*"After getting into this habit, I felt a lot of peace. Whenever her memory bothers me, I increase the number of drugs to feel better." (participant2, p3, line79-80)*

#### **Sub Theme Two; Increase in Usage Over Time**

As students continued using drugs, many reported a gradual but significant escalation in the frequency and quantity of substance intake. Several participants described how the initial small amounts eventually stopped producing the desired effects, leading them to increase their intake in pursuit of the same level of relief.

*"First, it was just sometimes. Then it became daily, and now I can't stay without it." (participant 7, p12, line352-354)*

*"I smoke cigarettes 4–5 times a day. The use of other drugs depends on the situation." (participant3, p4, line121).*

#### **Sub Theme Three; Physical and Mental Dependence**

Over time, participants began experiencing clear signs of physical and mental dependence on drugs. following statement is given by participants in this regard.

*"If I don't smoke, I get headaches and can't concentrate." (participant1, p2, line37)*

*"Whenever I try to quit, I feel extremely restless and sad without any reason." (participant3, p5, line146)*

*"If I don't take it, I feel tired, anxious, and mentally stressed." (participant9, p16, line474-475)*

### **Main Theme Three; Consequences of Drug Use**

While initial drug use may provide temporary emotional or cognitive relief, the long-term consequences are overwhelmingly negative.

#### **Sub Theme One; Academic Decline**

One of the most immediate and visible consequences of drug use reported by participants was a sharp decline in academic performance. The following statement is given by participants in this regard.

*"My studies are just okay, but my personal life has been badly affected." (participant2, p8, line85)*

*"I used to be a good student, but after drugs, my attendance dropped. I stayed up late and missed morning classes." (participant8, p14, line425-427)*

*"My academic performance has dropped a lot. I go to class, but I can't concentrate." (participant14, p25, line754-755)*

#### **Sub Theme Two; Health Deterioration**

Mentally, they struggled with anxiety, irritability, depression, emotional instability, and cognitive impairments such as poor memory and difficulty concentrating.

*"My health is getting worse my sleep is disturbed, and my mind is always tired." (participant7, p12, line360-361)*

*"Sometimes my heartbeat gets very fast, and I have trouble breathing." (participant9, p16, line486-487)*

*"Because of the stress, my hair starts falling, and I get headaches." (participant5, p9, line252-253)*



### **Sub Theme Three; Isolation from Family and Real Friends**

Participants described feeling emotionally disconnected from their families, lying to their parents, avoiding real friends, and losing the social networks that once supported their emotional well-being. The following statement is given by participants in this regard.

*"My family noticed my behavior but I kept lying to them." (participant6, p10, line294-295)*

*"My mother cried many times and tried to talk to me, but I didn't listen to her." (participant 13, p23, line698-699)*

*"Some of my friends left me because they couldn't tolerate my addiction." (participant 15, p27, line802-803)*

### **Main Theme Four; Struggle to Quit**

Despite recognizing the harmful effects of their habits and expressing a sincere desire to stop, many participants described a relentless struggle marked by multiple failed attempts, severe withdrawal symptoms, and a deep-seated fear of lifelong addiction.

#### **Sub Theme One; Multiple Failed Attempts**

Almost all participants reported repeated efforts to quit drug use, often motivated by a sense of guilt, a desire to repair relationships, or a wish to reclaim their health and academic performance. The following statement is given by participant in this regard.

*"I have tried to quit many times. But when the study pressure comes again, I can't stop myself." (participant 1, p2, line35)*

*"Every time I decide to quit, something happens stress, exams, memories and I go back to it." (participant8, p15, line437-438)*

#### **Sub Theme Two; Withdrawal Symptoms (Headaches, Restlessness, Depression)**

The severity of withdrawal symptoms highlighted the physical dependence that had developed over time, making cessation not just a matter of willpower but a significant physiological battle. The following statement is given by participant in this regard.

*"If I don't smoke, I have stomach problems, headaches, and I feel tired all the time." (participant2, p3, line89-90)*

*"Whenever I think about quitting, I become more irritable. I don't feel like talking to anyone." (participant5, p9, line257-258)*

*"When I try to quit, I face extreme anxiety, lack of sleep, and mental stress." (participant 12, p22, line654-655)*

#### **Sub Theme Three; Fear of Lifelong Addiction**

Over time, many participants developed a deep fear that they might never be able to quit. Some expressed feelings of helplessness, loss of control, and even resignation to a life shaped by substance dependence.

*"I feel like I've gone so far into this path that there's no way back." (participant6, p11, line318)*

*"I'm so addicted now that I feel I can't quit even if I want to." (participant7, p13, line382)*

*"I think I can't get rid of this habit even if I try hard." (participant 13, p23, line712-713)*

### **Main Theme Five; Realization and Regret**

A powerful and deeply emotional theme that emerged from the interviews was Realization and Regret. Over time, many participants came to recognize the harmful consequences of their substance use and expressed profound remorse over the choices they made.

#### **Sub Theme One; Awareness of Self-Destruction**

This awareness often came during moments of self-reflection, triggered by personal failures, declining health, or witnessing the disappointment in their loved ones' eyes. The following statement is given by participant in this regard.

*"I wasted valuable time and damaged my health. If I had understood earlier that drugs are not a solution, my life might have been different." (participant3, p5, line137-138)*

*"Every day I regret starting this habit." (participant9, p16, line471-472)*

### **Sub Theme Two; Regret over Lost Opportunities**

Another common emotional experience was regret for the lost opportunities caused by substance use. Participants expressed deep sorrow over the academic achievements, personal goals, and future ambitions that were derailed due to their addiction.

*"My parents lost trust in me, my studies were affected, and I've lost a lot, so I feel intense regret." (participant 15, p26, line808-809)*

*"I believe that if I hadn't turned to drugs, my life would be much better today." (participant 10, p18, line537-538)*

### **Sub Theme Three; Emotional Guilt Towards Parents**

Perhaps the most heartbreaking aspect of participants' regret was their emotional guilt towards their parents. Several students described seeing pain, confusion, and sadness in their parents' eyes, which amplified their own feelings of shame and regret.

*"Seeing pain in my parents' eyes makes me feel very ashamed." (participant2, p3, line83)*

*"My mother cried many times and tried to talk to me, but I didn't listen to her." (participant 13, p23, line698-699)*

*"When my mother found my drug stuff and cried, I realized how much I had hurt her." (participant7, p12, line357-358)*

The emotional guilt toward parents became a powerful internal force, sometimes motivating attempts to quit, but also contributing to self-blame and emotional distress.

### **Main Theme Six; Pathways to Recovery**

Despite the challenges and despair faced by many participants, the thematic analysis also uncovered hopeful narratives about recovery and healing.

#### **Sub Theme One; Role of Positive Friends and Family Support**

Family members especially parents who responded with empathy rather than punishment gave participants the emotional strength to imagine a life beyond addiction. The following statement is given by participants in this regard.

*"If someone better comes into my life and supports me, I might be able to quit." (participant 2, p4, line97-98)*

*"Good friends and family can save you from this hell." (participant8, p15, line444)*

This subtheme highlights the transformative power of love, trust, and emotional bonding in healing addictive behaviors.

#### **Sub Theme Two; Need for Professional Help (Psychologists, Therapy)**

There was a common acknowledgment that self-will alone was often not enough, especially when physical and psychological dependence had become severe.

*"Talking to a psychologist made me realize I was destroying myself." (participant 10, p18, line555-556)*

*"A psychologist can guide me out of this." (participant 12, p22, line663)*

These findings align with global research that emphasizes early psychological intervention as a key component of successful addiction recovery.

#### **Sub Theme Three; Importance of Self-Awareness and Motivation**

Students who maintained a strong internal drive were more likely to seek help, avoid relapses, and actively work towards healthier lifestyles. The following statement is given by participants in this regard.

*"First, I need to admit to myself that it's a disease and I need help." (participant 13, p23, line711)*





*"If I keep myself busy and stay with positive people, I believe I can overcome it." (participant 15, p27, line826)*

This subtheme underscores that recovery is an active, intentional process, requiring not only external resources but inner courage and commitment.

### **Main Theme Seven; Advice to Others**

One of the most striking and hopeful aspects of the participants' narratives was their desire to warn and guide other students based on their own painful experiences with substance use.

### **Sub Theme One; Avoiding Peer Pressure**

Participants emphasized that true friends do not encourage self-destructive behavior and that it is critical to recognize the difference between real and fake social acceptance. The following statement is given by participants in this regard.

*"Don't try to fit in by harming yourself." (participant 14, p25, line773-774)*

*"Never change yourself for others. Believe in your real personality." (participant 4, p7, line211-212)*

*"If someone is forcing you to do wrong, they are not real friends." (participant 8, p15, line448-449)*

This subtheme highlights that early education about peer pressure, self-confidence, and assertiveness skills is essential in drug use prevention among students.

### **Sub Theme Two; Seeking Help Early**

Students emphasized that struggling silently out of fear, pride, or shame only worsened their problems. Participants encouraged future students to speak openly about their stress, sadness, or pressures, to reach out for emotional support, and not delay professional help when needed. The following statement is given by participants in this regard.

*"Talk to someone before it's too late." (participant 9, p17, line498-499)*

*"Seek help before you waste your life." (participant 15, p27, line832-833)*

*"If you feel stressed, talk to your teachers, friends, or a professional." (participant 5, p9, line265-266)*

### **Sub theme three; Valuing Life and Health**

Lastly, participants passionately advised others to value their own life and health above all else.

*"Life is precious; don't waste it." (participant 13, p24, line718-719)*

*"Handle stress positively because your health and future matter most." (participant 5, p9, line266-267)*

*"Problems come in life, but with time, things get better — just don't give up." (participant 10, p19, line558-559)*

This subtheme reflects a deep moral realization that life is too valuable to be compromised by substances, and that hope, patience, and healthy coping strategies are the real keys to overcoming challenges.

## **Discussion**

The objective was to determine the risk factors for substance abuse in this population. The university students who abused drugs conducted 15 semi-structured in-depth interviews. Thematic analysis found seven main themes and numerous sub-themes. The factors initiating drug use for university aged youth in this study mainly included: academic stress, peer pressure, and emotional trauma. Personal emotional upheaval, such as: ending a relationship or familial conflict, would also initiate drug use. Participants discussed using substances to suppress emotions like, abandonment, loneliness, and feeling helplessness which supported the self-soothing aspect of the Self-Medication Hypothesis (Khantzian, 1997). Participants' accounts reflected a clear transformation from initiation to dependence. Grade students initially found drugs provided temporary emotional relief from their anxiety then calm. The immediate pleasure provided by drugs and subsequent emotional relief, supports the behavioural model or theory of addiction, which suggests individuals are more likely to repeat behaviours that are immediately pleasurable (Wise & Koob, 2014).

Participants reported increasing both the frequency of use and amounts used over time in order to achieve similar effects; thus demonstrating tolerance, which is a key factor for dependence (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2013). Withdrawal from drugs also increased in frequency, causing physical symptoms like headaches, or fatigue, and psychological symptoms such as anxiety and irritability. The neurobiological basis of addiction explains that repeated use of drugs changes the brain's reward pathways so that stopping drug use becomes more difficult (Volkow et al., 2016). The consequences of substance use are devastating in the academic and health and social area. Many participants reported significant effects on their academic performance, reported poor grades in school (some didn't go to class and disengaged). Prior research has indicated the negative impact of substance use on academic achievement and performance (Arria et al., 2013). Other health suffered too, both physical (e.g., insomnia, fatigue) and mental (e.g., depression, anxiety). This further supports the growing literature declaring substance use leads to negative effects on your health (World Health Organization [WHO], 2014).

Additionally, participants suffered from social isolation and loss of trust, as well as troubled family relationships; which once again aligns with previous studies showing substance use leads to far-reaching effects on social functioning and protective social bonding behaviors (Brook et al., 2002). Even when recognizing harm, participants reported it was still extremely difficult to stop. Participants reported repeated attempts to try and quit; and this is indicative of maladaptive patterns and a chronic relapsing disease of addiction (Marlatt & Donovan, 2005). The occurrence of withdrawal symptoms, including irritability, depression, and discomfort in their bodies, posed significant barriers to sustained abstinence (APA, 2013). Participants reported experiences of learned helplessness (Seligman, 1975), in which they felt trapped in addiction cycles and doubted they will ever be able to recover from their addiction without help from others. The participants reported signs of greater emotional awareness, acknowledging their emotional regret and recognizing that the habits they had participated in were self-destructive behaviour.

The participants' understanding in this regard created cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957), in which students experienced stress trying to reconcile their behaviour with their identity and values because they believed the habits were inconsistent with their values. Support of trusted friends and family was reported as critical for recovery. This aligns with the Recovery Model discussed previously, which identifies critical elements of recovery as community support, empowerment, and self-directed. The participants were aware that a professional mental health service was necessary for an emotional healing process and a behavioural change process. The focus on accessible mental health counselling services on campus is emphasized in the literature. Both psychological recovery & substance recovery were in reality dependent on intrinsic motivation and self-awareness regarding the desire to improve. The Transtheoretical Model of Change (Prochaska & DiClemente, 1983), which identifies contemplative behaviour before addicts can compel them overcome their addiction and move forward with behaviours that foster long-term and lasting recovery, was prevalent. Students reported the desire to sustain a long-term vision and prioritise their health safety in the moment over temporary satisfaction.

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