



date:

strategy

workbook

ncpic
national cannabis
prevention and
information centre

Many people who use cannabis can cut down or stop when they want to – others find it harder. But you can learn skills that have helped many people change their cannabis use.

This booklet aims to help you to:

- **build motivation to change your smoking**
- **think about your reasons for changing your smoking**
- **recognise actions and situations that lead you to smoke**
- **set goals and plan for change**
- **cope better with ‘hanging out’ (craving)**
- **manage any withdrawal symptoms**

1

cannabis dependence

Just like other drugs such as alcohol or nicotine you can become dependent on cannabis. **Cannabis dependence** can have both physical and psychological aspects to it.

After using cannabis heavily for a long time, **your body gets used to it**. You may find that you need to use more to get the same effect. That is, you build up tolerance.

You may also find that **going without a smoke might bring on some unpleasant physical effects** – these could be withdrawal symptoms. They might include trouble sleeping, stomach problems, feeling irritable, and cravings.

The symptoms of cannabis dependence are:

- tolerance
- withdrawal symptoms
- using more cannabis than you planned
- not being able to control your use
- spending a lot of time getting and using cannabis, and recovering from cannabis use
- giving up important activities because of your cannabis use
- continuing to use cannabis even if it is causing you physical or psychological problems

Does this sound like you? Mark the things above that have happened to you.

Levels of dependence

Dependence is not an all-or-nothing thing. The level of dependence can be measured on the Severity of Dependence Scale (SDS). This gives a score out of 15. If you get a score of 3 or more you may be dependent. The higher your score the higher your level of dependence.

Your clinician will give you your SDS score.

Write it here.



How does that look to you – what do you think it means?

.....

.....

.....

.....

2

triggers and high risk situations

Before you change your smoking it helps to know when you are most likely to use cannabis.

High risk situations include times and places where you usually smoke. For example, if you usually smoke with certain friends, then you will probably feel like a smoke whenever you are with them.

Triggers are feelings or events that cause strong thoughts about wanting to smoke. They can be internal (certain moods or feelings) or external (sitting down to watch TV, listening to music, or having a visit from friends).

Personal high risk situations and triggers are different for everyone. If you know what yours are, you can prepare for them, which will make it easier to resist smoking.

► Write down your own high risk situations and triggers here.

My high risk situations and triggers:

Internal (thoughts and feelings)

e.g. bored, stressed, angry ...

1

2

3

4

5

6

7

8

9

External (situations and places)

e.g. someone offers me a smoke, seeing my friends who smoke, watching a video

1

2

3

4

5

6

7

8

9

3

why smoke?

When you're thinking about changing your cannabis use it helps to remind yourself why you smoke and why you want to change. This will help keep you focussed and motivated.

As you know, when you are stoned you may feel many things, such as:

- feeling good/great
- feelings of relaxation and escape
- talking and laughing more than usual
- loss of inhibitions
- increased appetite ('the munchies')

There can also be effects that are not so good, such as:

- paranoia (e.g. like someone's talking about you, when they're not)
- anxiety (e.g. feeling on edge)
- short-term memory loss
- poor co-ordination

To keep it fresh in our minds, we will have another look at the **good** and **not so good things** about **your** smoking that we talked about earlier. Write your list of good and not so good things about smoking.

What do you get from smoking cannabis? What are the things you like about it? How important to you are these things?

On the other hand, **what are the not so good things?** How important are these?

► Take some time to think about each of them and rate them from 1 (not at all important) to 10 (extremely important). Add up the total score for each column.

Good things about smoking

score (1–10)

1

2

3

4

5

6

7

8

9

10

My total

Not so good things about smoking

score (1–10)

1

2

3

4

5

6

7

8

9

10

My total

Do you have anything else to add to the list, or other changes to make?

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why change?

The list on the previous page can tell you **how you feel about smoking**. If there is a higher score for the **not so good things about smoking column** than the **good things column**, you are probably clear about wanting to change.

Thinking about why you want to change can also help with your motivation.

We can make another list that looks at **the good things** and **not so good things** about changing your cannabis smoking.



Good things about change

score (1–10)

1

2

3

4

5

6

7

8

9

10

My total

Not so good things about change

score (1–10)

1

2

3

4

5

6

7

8

9

10

My total

You will notice that these two sets of lists are not necessarily the same (that is, the **not so good things about smoking** are not necessarily the same as **the good things about change**). Use these lists to look closely at your reasons for using and wanting to change. These will help you develop a plan for action.

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increasing enjoyable activities

Some things we do just because they need to be done (e.g. a job, housework). But it's good to have things you also want to do in your life.

Once you've cut down or stopped smoking you'll have more time and energy to do other stuff. It's a good idea to think about what you're interested in and what sort of positive things you might enjoy doing.

These may be things that you used to do but haven't done in a while, or maybe things you've always wanted to try, or just anything else that you enjoy doing. If you don't spend money on cannabis you now have more money to work on plans such as buying a car, or clothes/shoes etc.

Here are some suggestions:

- play guitar (or take lessons)
- go to a movie
- read
- swim
- skate
- listen to music
- surf
- draw/paint
- practice martial arts
- cook and eat food
- surf the net free at the local library
- go to the gym
- design some jewelry
- play tennis
- meditate
- play video games
- walk in the park

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dealing with high risk situations

We will now consider your **personal high risk situations**. These situations are usually associated with a major craving (a strong urge to use cannabis), so the risk of having a smoke is high.

There are many ways to deal with them. **One of the best is to try to avoid them**, particularly for the first couple of weeks after you have stopped or cut down your smoking. Sometimes this will take some planning. For example, don't visit friends who you know will be smoking at the time. Temptation is likely to arise, and it can be very difficult to deal with in the early stages.

Some situations are hard to avoid. These include things like:

- the time of day or week (e.g. Friday night)
- certain mood states (e.g. stress, boredom)

Again, it is useful to think ahead and have a plan ready for dealing with these things when they happen. For example, boredom can be handled by planning activities to do when the feeling comes on.

In the space on the next page, write your strategy for dealing with each of the high risk situations you have come up with earlier. (There may be more than one – mix and match if that helps.)

Knowing your high risk situations and preparing for them will help you deal with them more effectively.

High risk situation	Preferred strategy
1	
2	
3	
4	
5	
6	
7	
8	

Personal plan: high risk situation

Here are a few other examples of how you might deal with being in a high risk situation.

- I will leave the situation or environment
- I will put off the decision to smoke for 30 minutes (I know that cravings are short term. I'll wait it out.)
- I will change my thoughts about smoking (do I really **need** a smoke?)
- I will think of something unrelated to smoking
- I will remind myself of my success to this point
- I will call someone I trust and talk about it

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cravings: urges to smoke

Cravings are strong urges to smoke or ‘hanging out’. They are normal. Almost everyone who stops or cuts down their smoking or can’t get any cannabis for some reason has some cravings. Can you think of a time when you were really craving a smoke?

Understanding cravings, and how they happen, will help you deal with them more effectively.

Cravings tend to happen in events or situations that you have previously associated with smoking (your personal triggers that you listed earlier: p 5).

Cravings only get stronger if you give in and ‘feed’ them. They will eventually weaken and die if you don’t.

You may have noticed that cravings tend to last only a short time. Have there been times when you couldn’t have a smoke when you had a strong urge to have one? Did the urge pass?

The key point is that cravings generally don’t last more than 30 minutes. This is true for everybody, but few people give themselves the chance to prove it.

Handling cravings/urges

Urges tend to come and go in waves – they reach a ‘peak’ and then get weaker. It’s like a wave rising up then passing you by. Knowing that they are short term will help you handle them. If you ride them out they will weaken. This is called ‘urge surfing’.

▶ **If your cravings are feeling strong try:**

Distracting: do something unrelated to smoking. Take a walk, eat, phone a friend. (Look back to your list of enjoyable activities for ideas: p 10).

Delaying: check the time and make a deal with yourself not to have a smoke for at least half an hour. Do something else while you wait. After half an hour decide whether you still really need to have a smoke.

Keeping the craving in perspective: don't get carried away. How does it compare to a bad case of sunburn or being really stressed? Remember that a craving is uncomfortable but not unbearable; you don't have to be overwhelmed by it. Don't let it get out of proportion.

De-stressing: it's important to take time to relax and unwind, e.g. have a bath, walk, or listen to music.

Remember the negatives: often when having cravings people tend to remember only the positive effects of smoking and forget the negatives. It can be useful to think of the negative effects of smoking and the benefits of not smoking.

Another useful strategy is to avoid situations with strong personal triggers. For example, if you keep sitting in front of the TV, with other people around you smoking, you will only be making these triggers stronger.

Cravings do go away, but they may be very strong for a while just after you quit or cut down.

You win every time you beat your craving. It makes the craving weaker next time and makes you more confident you can resist a smoke.

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withdrawal symptoms

Although not everyone gets them, you may get some withdrawal symptoms after you stop smoking cannabis. These can be uncomfortable but are not dangerous.

Withdrawal symptoms are actually signs that your body is getting used to going without cannabis. So, they can be seen as a good sign of progress.

Psychological symptoms are the most common and may include:

- feeling cranky and irritable
- anxiety
- confusion
- trouble concentrating
- depression
- anger
- craving/urges to smoke

Some **physical symptoms** are also possible. These may include:

- sleeping problems and vivid dreams
- night sweats
- loss of appetite
- tremors or shaking

Don't worry, these symptoms are usually quite mild and only last a week or so.

During any period of withdrawal it's important to look after yourself.

- eat well and drink plenty of water
- get a bit of exercise
- try and get some regular sleep

The techniques of distraction, delay and de-stressing can be helpful ways of dealing with symptoms (p 14). Try to keep them in perspective.

9 the future

Firstly, think back to our earlier session when we looked at your goals and plans for the future. Look at your 3 most important goals – are these goals still the same, or do you want to make some changes? **Write these 3 goals, including any changes, in the left hand column below.**

Current goal	Effect of cannabis use
<i>e.g. buy a car</i>	<i>have less money</i>
1	
2	
3	
4	

Now think about the effects of smoking cannabis. How does smoking help, or not help, you achieve your goals? **Write this down in the right hand column next to each of your goals.**

If you think about the effects of your smoking on your ability to achieve your goals, **this will be a reminder of how important it is to make changes.**

10 doing it

- ▶ Which is the best way to change? This depends largely on your level of dependence, which we looked at earlier.


If you have a high level of dependence, you may want to cut down over a few days before you make the change.

You could do it like this:

- **gradually delay the time of day you have your first smoke by 4 – 6 hours each day, and**
- **count the number of cones you use and reduce this by 20% each day (e.g. if you use 10 cones a day, you would cut down by 2 cones)**

If you have a lower level of dependence, you may be better off stopping altogether. This way you will be getting on with it and it will take the hassle out of working out how to reduce your use.

If you have tried one method before and it worked OK for a while, use it again.

- 
- ▶ The next thing is to choose (and stick to) the date you are going to make the change. (If you don't set a specific date you may never get started).

**Write down your
change date:**

▶ **Preparing mentally**

Changing your cannabis use may not be easy, but it is not impossible. **Being aware of trouble spots and planning ahead will help you to succeed.**

Most people who have done it say that it was not as bad as they thought it would be. It is the belief that it's going to be really hard that puts people off and makes the job harder.

Other people have done it and you can do it too.

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doing it continued

► Beware of rationalisations

You may find sometimes that your mind seems to ‘play tricks’ on you – it’s almost like it’s trying to get you to have a smoke. These thoughts are rationalisations and they seem to automatically make excuses for having a smoke immediately. **These can be a real threat if you don’t recognise them.**

Common ones include:

“It’s a special occasion”

“I’ve had a really hard week”

“Just one last smoke”

You can probably think of a few others.

Rationalisations are important warning signs. Recognising them will help you deal with them.

If you notice that you are beginning to rationalise, say that to yourself. **Make a strong, positive statement to yourself that you will stick with your decision to change and your desire to be successful.**

► Stopping smoking can be like losing a friend

People giving up smoking often say that it feels like they are losing a good friend. It may be a bit like this for you. If cannabis has been a big part of your life, you may feel that there is a gap once you stop using.

These feelings do pass, although it takes time. You will discover new opportunities over time as you focus less on smoking.

► Rewarding yourself

Often people feel that the best reward for all their hard work is, of course, a smoke. This is a **major danger**.

Have other rewards worked out in advance (e.g. spending some of the money you saved from not buying cannabis). Be honest in acknowledging your achievements. **Write your own rewards below.**

My reward options:

1

.....

2

.....

3

.....

4

.....

5

.....

6

.....

11 self monitoring

A very good way to keep your focus is to **keep a daily diary of your progress for a week**. This is called **self monitoring**.

Self monitoring will help keep track of your commitment to change. It will show up any patterns of problems you may have with cravings, high risk situations and smoking.

Keeping tabs on your smoking can also help slow down the sometimes 'automatic' nature of having a smoke.

Use the self monitoring form provided to keep track of:

- your change date (p 18)
- your total number of days without use or reduced use
- daily amounts smoked (if any)
- possible problem situations/times/feelings
- how you dealt with risky situations
- your confidence in dealing with risky situations

Each day fill in the form with ratings of the strength of any cravings you had, the situation they occurred in, any moods or feelings that went with them, what you did and what happened. Also note down your 'mastery rating' for each of the situations. Your mastery rating refers to how successful you felt in handling the situation. It is rated from 0 ('not at all successful') to 10 ('completely successful').

At the end of the week check back over the form to see how you did. Let yourself be proud of the good things you achieved.

If you made mistakes or had problems, stay positive. Look at the mistakes and learn from them. Think of strategies you can use to avoid making the same mistakes again next time.

Your change date:

self monitoring diary

Date & Time	Situation: where/ with whom	Strength of urge/desire (0-10)	Thoughts and feelings	Outcomes (actions, challenges, thoughts, consequences)	Amount smoked (e.g. no. of cones)	Mastery rating (0-10)

Total number of days of abstinence/change:

Strength of urge/craving (0-10)

0 = none
5 = moderate
10 = maximum

Mastery rating (0-10)

0 = not at all successful
10 = completely successful

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relapse prevention

‘Relapses’ and ‘slips’

A relapse is when you return to your old level of cannabis use. A slip is a ‘one-off’ case of having a smoke, which does not necessarily mean you will have a full relapse.

It is quite common to make mistakes when you begin learning a new skill. Changing your cannabis use is no different, and you may make the odd mistake.

If you do have a slip it is important to remember that this doesn’t mean you have failed, or you are unable to change, or can let yourself slip into a full relapse.

What is important to long-term success is how you handle the slip. How to handle it will depend on how it happened. The slip may have been intentional or unintentional.

Intentional slips

Slips can happen ‘on purpose’ for a couple of reasons. You may tell yourself that you are tired of sticking to your plan and want a night off. Or you may decide that you deserve

a reward (a smoke) for what you’ve achieved so far, or it is just too hard.

If this happens to you, think carefully about your reasons for wanting to change.

- **consider your reasons for changing. How important are these to you?**
- **remind yourself that each slip reduces your chances of long term success. Your craving will return more strongly, which means more hard work**

Unintentional slips

You may have a slip, despite your best intentions, because you find yourself in a high risk situation with your guard down. If you do, look at your strategies to see what can be improved.

- **did you just slip into an old habit again without thinking?**
- **are you finding some high risk situations too hard right now?**
- **is there a better way of dealing with them?**

► Thinking about what happened and why will make it easier to avoid the same mistake next time

The best thing is to get back on track as soon as possible, and **stay positive** about your ability to handle it.

Plan for dealing with a slip

A slip can feel like a crisis, and getting back to your chosen goal will take some effort. Here are some things to do.

If I have a slip

- I will get rid of the cannabis and get away from the situation where I smoked
- I will remind myself that one smoke or even a day of smoking doesn't have to result in a full blown relapse
- I will not give in to guilt or blame myself because these feelings will pass
- I will call for help from someone I trust
- I will look at the slip to see what triggers there were and my reaction to them
- I will think about what I expected cannabis to change or provide
- I will set up a plan for coping with similar situations in the future

Remember: a slip is only a set-back, it doesn't mean failure

13 summary

- ▶ Changing your smoking habits may not be easy, but **you can do it**. It will take some **effort, planning,** and **persistence**.

If you want to change, and you **work toward your goal in a planned and careful way**, it will work for you. Be prepared and keep your eyes open for trouble spots.

When you have succeeded in changing your smoking the possibilities of new opportunities and a new lifestyle will be there for you.



For more information contact:

National Cannabis
Information and Helpline

1800 30 40 50 (toll free)

Useful websites include the following:

National Cannabis Prevention
and Information Centre

www.ncpic.org.au

Kids Helpline

(24 hour telephone service)
1800 55 1800:
www.kidshelp.com.au

Reachout – an interactive
website for young people

www.reachout.com.au

Somazone – a website
by and for young people

www.somazone.com.au