

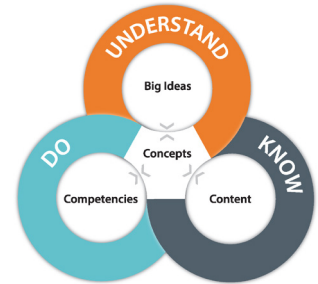
## Rethinking Risk: Ways to assess and manage risk as a part of life

Risk is a part of life. It isn't even possible, or desirable, to avoid all risk. Many of us seek risk and enjoy activities that involve risk. And it turns out that challenging ourselves and taking risks is essential to our growth, development and learning. This suggests we need to develop learning strategies related to risk assessment and management, rather than just trying to eliminate risk as something negative in our lives.

A key thing to remember is that risk and harm play out within an environmental context. That is, whether or not a "risky" behaviour leads to harm depends on many factors, such as our age, gender, race, cultural background, social position and personal identity. When it comes to using psychoactive substances, the substances themselves contribute to the degree of risk and harm. This is because substances are incredibly diverse. Cannabis is not the same as alcohol. Smoking a cigarette is not the same as vaping. It's not that one is harmful and one is not. It's just that we need to pay attention to the complexity of substance use in order to understand its risks (and benefits), and address a range of issues that take into consideration different types of people at different places and times. It also means that we need to learn how to critically assess situations, consider multiple factors involved in those situations, and make decisions based on knowledge and experience.

This lesson uses [Blunt Talk II: A picture of cannabis use among BC youth](#) by the McCreary Centre Society to explore different aspects of risk and risky behaviours, strategies to manage risk, and their application to substance use, in particular cannabis use. *Blunt Talk* is based on the 2018 BC Adolescent Health Survey, completed by almost 38,000 students in Grades 7-12 across British Columbia. Some students filling in the survey also provided a rich collection of comments. Moreover, McCreary's Youth Research Academy (YRA)—a group of youth aged 16 to 24 with experience in the government care system—also provided reflections on the issues. Some of the student comments and YRA reflections are used in the dialogue-based instructional strategies.

Note: In facilitating dialogue, it is important to realize that the goal is to build partnerships with youth to support their normal socialization and healthy development. While we may be uncomfortable with some of their ideas, it is important to explore those ideas and understand *why* they may hold them rather than simply shutting them down by presenting "facts." See [Facilitating Dialogue in the Classroom](#).



## Instructional Strategies

1. Have students play the *Factors Game* (included). Divide students into small groups and give each group a game set (game board, set of 9 cards from single sheet and any small object to use as a marker). Allow enough time to play the game so that each person has at least a few chances to turn over a factor card and propose a change in the scenario.

After the game, facilitate a class discussion asking: Was it always easy to agree about the placement of the marker? Why, or why not?

Invite students again to work in groups to create a scene depicting one of the scenarios they played in the *Factors Game* and have them present this scene to the class. Then, ask the class to suggest a change in any of the person, drug, or context factors and discuss its affect on the potential risk in that scenario.

2. Provide a bit of background to *Blunt Talk II: A picture of cannabis use among BC youth*. Choose one or more of the themes below and distribute or display the quotes (handouts included). Then facilitate a class discussion or have students work in groups to discuss issues raised by some of the quotes. The questions provided may be helpful in facilitating dialogue.

### Eating vs. smoking cannabis

*"It was initially surprising to us that only 16% of youth ate their cannabis because we see eating it as potentially less harmful to your body than smoking it. However, youth often don't really know much about edibles and that they could be dangerous for youth. You have to be careful where you get it from, know how much you are eating, and understand what is in your edible. Otherwise it's really easy to have too much."* ~YRA reflection

*Some weed is stronger than others, so if you or a friend makes an edible it's really hard to know how much is too much. In contrast, with smoking cannabis it is easier to control the level of high that you get, and there isn't the same wait period for the high that there is with an edible. Also, edibles aren't as easily accessible, and no-one shares them in the way they pass a joint."* ~YRA reflection

- a. If eating cannabis is potentially less harmful than smoking, as the reflection suggests, why do you think fewer youth eat cannabis than smoke it?
- b. Can you think of other differences between eating and smoking cannabis (other than the ones mentioned in the reflection)? Discuss.
- c. The quote focuses on the potential harm of different *methods* of using cannabis. What other factors might increase or decrease the risk of use?
- d. How can young people enhance their understanding of potential harms and benefits relative to cannabis or other drugs use?

### Medical cannabis use

*"Cannabis could be beneficial because it may help to reduce feelings of anxiety, depression, anger, and aches and pains. CBD oil in particular might be really beneficial for certain illnesses. Cannabis could also be a safer way to manage pain than opioids, depending on personal circumstances."* ~YRA reflection

*"When I first began using marijuana, I noticed I slept much better and I was much more focused in school. That's why I use it."* ~Grade 11 student



*"I smoke a weed strain 'charlottes web' to help with my muscle spasms. It also helps to regulate my mood." ~Grade 9 student*

*"Seriously? Have you ever used "medical" cocaine? Wake up." ~Grade 10 student*

*"I have been smoking weed for a while now and it seems to really help me get through since I started. I am too young to get a prescription and I don't know if I should tell my doctor." ~Grade 9 student*

*"Don't you have to be over 19 [to have a prescription for cannabis]?" ~Grade 10 student*

*"Youth who have medical cannabis prescriptions could benefit from help from their parents to manage their medication and ensure it is being used the way it is prescribed." ~YRA reflection*

- a. If cannabis helps some students, can it also be harmful? If so, how could it be managed?
- b. What alternatives can you think of for medicinal cannabis use? What are the pros and cons of each alternative?
- c. How might understanding medical use of cannabis help us better support each other?
- d. How could adults help young people mitigate risks related to medical use of cannabis? How about schools?
- e. How could students help each other manage risks related to medical use of cannabis?

### Managing unwanted symptoms

*"The stats around marijuana and sleep confirm that a lot of youth don't know a lot about marijuana and how to use it to get the effect they want. Youth use marijuana to help them sleep but there are many different strains of marijuana that can have different effects—some might keep them awake, which is the opposite effect to what they want." ~YRA reflection*

*"If you're using cannabis medicinally, it's important to consult an open-minded doctor that you trust, and who is genuinely knowledgeable about how cannabis can be used medicinally. It's easy to use it incorrectly and to make the symptoms you're experiencing worse. For example, if you're using cannabis to manage anxiety, some kinds of cannabis may make your anxiety worse." ~YRA reflection*

- a. How could youth manage unwanted affects of cannabis use?
- b. Imagine someone you know is using cannabis to manage certain symptoms and experiencing some negative effects. How do you think that person might feel? How could you help that person?

### Boredom and cannabis use

*"Sometimes youth smoke cannabis at a young age because there is nothing else to do. Having after-school programs could help youth stay connected and engaged in fun activities. It could also give youth access to a supportive adult which is very important, especially if they do not have one at home." ~YRA reflection*

*"It makes sense that youth who don't get to participate in after-school activities would smoke cannabis more often. Smoking cannabis turns 'having nothing to do' into something to do." ~YRA reflection*

- a. Why do you think someone might use cannabis when there is "nothing else to do"? What other things might one do when there is "nothing else to do"?
- b. Who do you think is responsible for having nothing to do?
- c. In what ways do you think cannabis is being helpful to young people who feel there is "nothing else to do"?
- d. What risks are there in using cannabis out of boredom? How could those risks be mitigated?



3. Invite students to think of times when they engaged in a risky behaviour. Encourage them to pick one example that they might be prepared to share. (Note: The examples do not have to be about drug use. They could include anything that helps students reflect on assessing and managing risk, e.g., skateboarding, mountain biking, getting together with someone from the internet, breaking curfew, speeding.) Then, have students work in small groups and take turns sharing their scenarios and reasons. Encourage them to listen to each other's experiences and reflect on the reasons. After that, facilitate a class discussion using questions such as:
  - a. Why did you engage in the risky behaviour? What factors influenced your decision?
  - b. How aware of the risks were you?
  - c. What might have changed your choice?
  - d. What would not likely have changed your choice?
  - e. What risk-management strategies did you use at the time? What strategies might you use today if you were to engage in the same behaviour?

## Drug Literacy

### BIG IDEAS

- ✓ Drugs can be tremendously helpful and also very harmful.
- ✓ As humans, both individually and as communities, we need to learn how to manage the drugs in our lives
- ✓ We can learn how to control our drug use by reflecting on the different ways people have thought about drugs, exploring stories from various cultures and listening to each other.

### COMPETENCIES

- ✓ Assess the complex ways in which drugs impact the health and wellbeing of individuals, families, communities and societies
- ✓ Explore and appreciate diversity related to the reasons people use drugs, the impact of drug use and the social attitudes toward various drugs
- ✓ Recognize binary constructs (e.g., good vs bad) and assess their limitation in addressing complex social issues like drug use
- ✓ Recognize how official responses to drugs may have less to do with the drug than with other factors
- ✓ Develop social and communication skills in addressing discourse and behaviour related to drugs
- ✓ Develop personal and social strategies to manage the risks, benefits and harms related to drugs

Check out the full list of [drug literacy competencies](#), as defined by the Canadian Institute for Substance Use Research.



## Links to curriculum

### CORE COMPETENCIES

This lesson helps build capacity in all three Core Competencies: Communication (communicating and collaborating), Thinking (creative, critical and reflective thinking), and Personal and Social Development (personal awareness and responsibility, positive personal and cultural identity, and social awareness and responsibility).

### PHYSICAL AND HEALTH EDUCATION 7

#### BIG IDEAS

- ✓ We experience many changes in our lives that influence how we see ourselves and others
- ✓ Healthy choices influence our physical, emotional and mental well-being
- ✓ Learning about similarities and differences in individuals and groups influences community health

#### COMPETENCIES

- ✓ Identify factors that influence healthy choices and explain their potential health effects
- ✓ Reflect on outcomes of personal healthy-living goals and assess strategies used
- ✓ Describe and assess strategies for managing problems related to mental well-being and substance use, for others
- ✓ Describe and assess strategies for promoting mental well-being, for self and others
- ✓ Explore strategies for promoting the health and well-being of the school and community

### PHYSICAL AND HEALTH EDUCATION 8

#### BIG IDEAS

- ✓ Healthy choices influence our physical, emotional and mental well-being
- ✓ Healthy relationships can help us lead rewarding and fulfilling lives
- ✓ Advocating for the health and well-being of others connects us to our community

#### COMPETENCIES

- ✓ Identify factors that influence healthy choices and explain their potential health effects
- ✓ Reflect on outcomes of personal healthy-living goals and assess strategies used
- ✓ Describe and assess strategies for managing problems related to mental well-being and substance use, for others
- ✓ Describe and assess strategies for promoting mental well-being, for self and others
- ✓ Create strategies for promoting the health and well-being of the school and community



## PHYSICAL AND HEALTH EDUCATION 9

### BIG IDEAS

- ✓ Healthy choices influence our physical, emotional and mental well-being
- ✓ Healthy relationships can help us lead rewarding and fulfilling lives
- ✓ Advocating for the health and well-being of others connects us to our community

## PHYSICAL AND HEALTH EDUCATION 10

### BIG IDEAS

- ✓ Understanding our strengths, weaknesses, and personal preferences helps us plan and achieve our goals
- ✓ Healthy choices influence, and are influenced by, our physical, emotional, and mental well-being

### COMPETENCIES

- ✓ Identify factors that influence health messages from a variety of sources, and analyze their influence on behaviour
- ✓ Reflect on outcomes of personal healthy-living goals and assess strategies used
- ✓ Assess and evaluate strategies for managing problems related to mental well-being and substance use, for others
- ✓ Analyze strategies for promoting mental well-being, for self and others
- ✓ Create strategies for promoting the health and well-being of the school and community

### COMPETENCIES

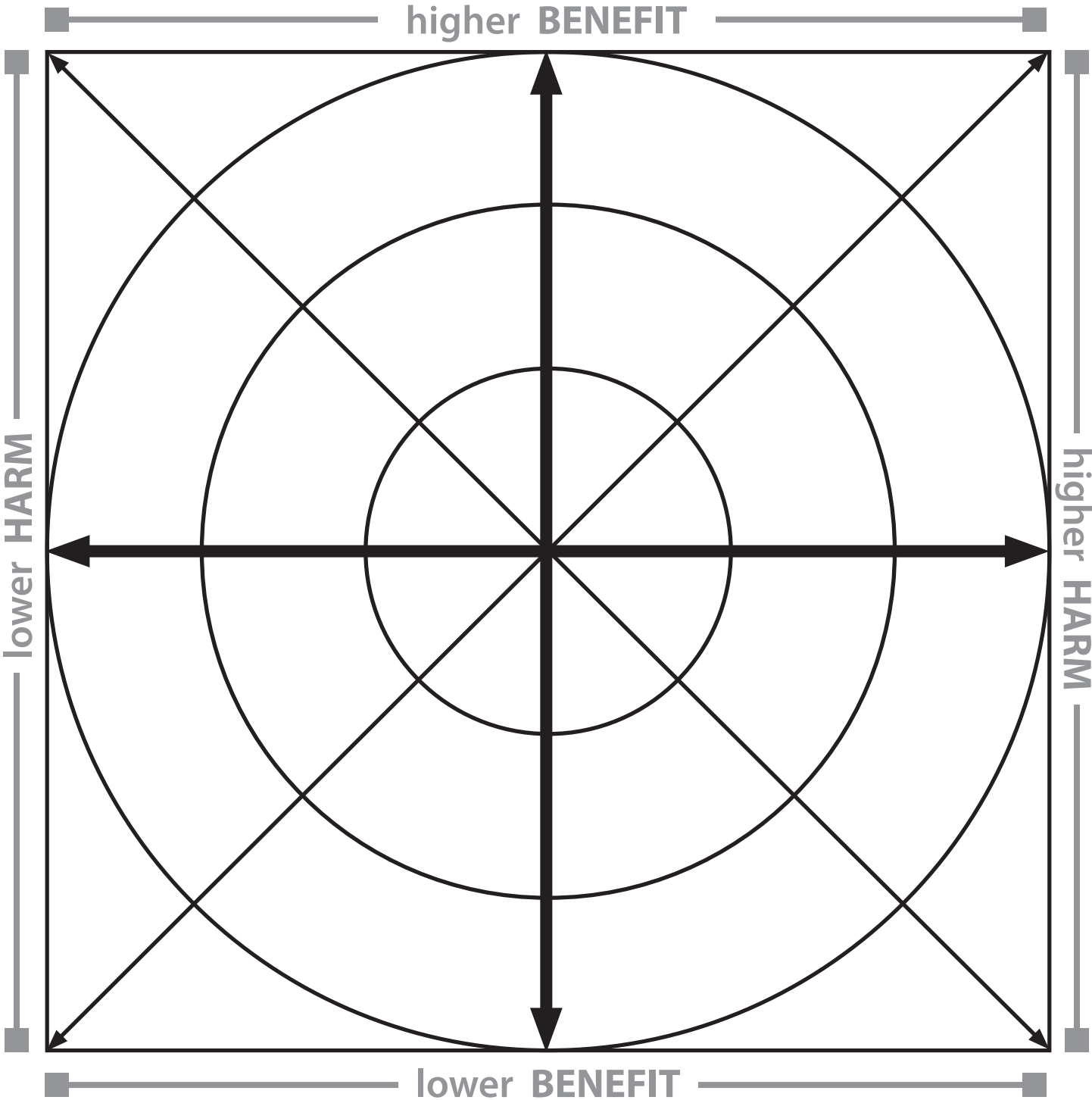
- ✓ Explore factors contributing to substance use
- ✓ Explore and describe factors that shape personal identities, including social and cultural factors
- ✓ Evaluate and explain strategies for promoting mental well-being
- ✓ Analyze the potential effects of social influences on health
- ✓ Reflect on outcomes of personal healthy-living goals and assess the effectiveness of various strategies

This resource was developed by the **Canadian Institute for Substance Use Research** with funding provided by the **BC Ministry of Health**. Any views expressed herein are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of the BC Ministry of Health or the Canadian Institute for Substance Use Research.

### Instructions:

1. Randomly sort the Factor Cards and place face down in a pile.
2. Player 1 constructs a modern day drug use scenario involving **person(s)** using a **drug** in a particular **context**, and then places a marker on the spectrum representing their estimation of the level of risk involved.
  - *e.g., Player 1 imagines a group of teens in a park getting drunk on a Saturday night and places a marker indicating low potential benefit and mid-high potential harm.*
3. All players discuss the placement and come to a consensus on final placement.
  - *e.g. Players debate the level of risk and agree to move the marker slightly higher on potential benefit.*
4. Player 2 turns over a factor card, proposes a change in the scenario related to the indicated factor, and moves the marker to reflect the change in risk.
  - *e.g., Player 2 picks up a Person card, changes the ages of the people to "young adults," and moves the marker to indicate slightly less potential harm.*
5. All players come to consensus on the placement, and then the process continues.
  - *e.g. After some debate, players agree with the placement.*
6. Game ends when time runs out, or when each player has had several chances to modify a scenario.









FACToR CARD

**Drug**

type, quantity, purity,  
frequency, method



FACToR CARD

**Person**

age, gender, physical health,  
mental health, sexual  
orientation, personality, job



FACToR CARD

**context**

peers, location, situation,  
access, drug laws, culture



FACToR CARD

**Drug**

type, quantity, purity,  
frequency, method



FACToR CARD

**Person**

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## Eating vs. smoking cannabis

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### Comments and reflections by youth

*"It was initially surprising to us that only 16% of youth ate their cannabis because we see eating it as potentially less harmful to your body than smoking it. However, youth often don't really know much about edibles and that they could be dangerous for youth. You have to be careful where you get it from, know how much you are eating, and understand what is in your edible. Otherwise it's really easy to have too much." ~YRA reflection*

*Some weed is stronger than others, so if you or a friend makes an edible it's really hard to know how much is too much. In contrast, with smoking cannabis it is easier to control the level of high that you get, and there isn't the same wait period for the high that there is with an edible. Also, edibles aren't as easily accessible, and no-one shares them in the way they pass a joint." ~YRA reflection*

### Reflective questions

- a. If eating cannabis is potentially less harmful than smoking, as the reflection suggests, why do you think fewer youth eat cannabis than smoke it?
- b. Can you think of other differences between eating and smoking cannabis (other than the ones mentioned in the reflection)? Discuss.
- c. The quote focuses on the potential harm of different *methods* of using cannabis. What other factors might increase or decrease the risk of use?
- d. How might you enhance your understanding of potential harms and benefits relative to cannabis or other drugs use?



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### Reflective questions

- a. If cannabis helps some students, can it also be harmful? If so, how could it be managed?
- b. What alternatives can you think of for medicinal cannabis use? What are the pros and cons of each alternative?
- c. How might understanding medical use of cannabis help us better support each other?
- d. How could adults help young people mitigate risks related to medical use of cannabis? How about schools?
- e. How could students help each other manage risks related to medical use of cannabis?



## Managing unwanted symptoms

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*"If you're using cannabis medicinally, it's important to consult an open-minded doctor that you trust, and who is genuinely knowledgeable about how cannabis can be used medicinally. It's easy to use it incorrectly and to make the symptoms you're experiencing worse. For example, if you're using cannabis to manage anxiety, some kinds of cannabis may make your anxiety worse." ~YRA reflection*

### Reflective questions

- a. Do you think unwanted symptoms are an issue when using cannabis? Can this be true of other medications? Explain.
- b. How could youth manage unwanted affects of cannabis use?
- c. Imagine someone you know is using cannabis to manage certain symptoms and experiencing some negative effects. How do you think that person might feel? How could you help that person?



## Boredom and Cannabis use

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### Comments and reflections by youth

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*"It makes sense that youth who don't get to participate in after-school activities would smoke cannabis more often. Smoking cannabis turns 'having nothing to do' into something to do."* ~YRA reflection

### Reflective questions

- a. Why do you think someone might use cannabis when there is "nothing else to do"? What other things might one do when there is "nothing else to do"?
- b. Who do you think is responsible for having nothing to do?
- c. In what ways do you think cannabis is being helpful to young people who feel there is "nothing else to do"?
- d. What risks are there in using cannabis out of boredom? How could those risks be mitigated?