**Conversation Starter Guide for Substance Use Screening**

Purpose: A quick, trauma‑informed script to help you open a respectful, stigma‑free conversation in any setting. Use what fits; skip what doesn’t.

**How to Use**

* Ask permission first; explain why you’re asking and how the info will help care.
* Normalize: many people use substances; we ask everyone the same questions.
* Use plain language; reflect back; avoid labels unless the client prefers them.
* Close with next steps and choices. Offer printed resources or a follow‑up.

**Warm Openers (pick one)**

* “I ask everyone a few questions about alcohol and other substances so I can tailor care. Is that okay?”
* “Substances affect health and mood in different ways. Would it be alright if I asked a few standard questions?”

**Core Questions**

Use these prompts conversationally. You do not have to ask all of them.

**1) Current Use**

* “What substances—like alcohol, cannabis, nicotine, stimulants, opioids, or others—do you use, if any?”
* “When did you last use? About how often?”
* “How do you use it (smoke, vape, eat, drink, snort, inject) and about how much?”

**2) Effects & Impact**

* “What do you like about it? What does it help with?”
* “Any downsides—health, sleep, work/school, relationships, legal, money?”

**3) Safety Check**

* “Any times you mixed with alcohol, benzos, or opioids?”
* “Have you ever had blackouts, overdoses, or needed medical help?”
* “Any withdrawal symptoms when cutting back or stopping?”

**4) Readiness & Goals**

* “If 0–10: how important is it to make a change? How confident are you?”
* “What would ‘safer use’ or ‘cutting back’ look like for you over the next 2 weeks?”

**5) Mental Health & Context (optional)**

* “How have your mood, anxiety, or sleep been lately?”
* “Any stressors (housing, food, safety, grief, trauma) we should consider?”

**If Youth or Family Present**

* Use developmentally appropriate language; focus on safety and curiosity, not consequences.
* Offer private time with the young person when possible.

**Close & Next Steps (examples)**

* “Thanks for being open. Based on what you shared, here are a couple of options: a safer‑use plan, a cravings plan, and optional referrals. What sounds best?”
* “Would you like a one‑page guide on alcohol/cannabis safety and a template to plan for cravings?”

**Red Flags → Consider Immediate Support**

* Recent overdose, severe withdrawal, suicidal thoughts, pregnancy with heavy use, mixing opioids with alcohol/benzos, or injection with unsafe supplies.

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