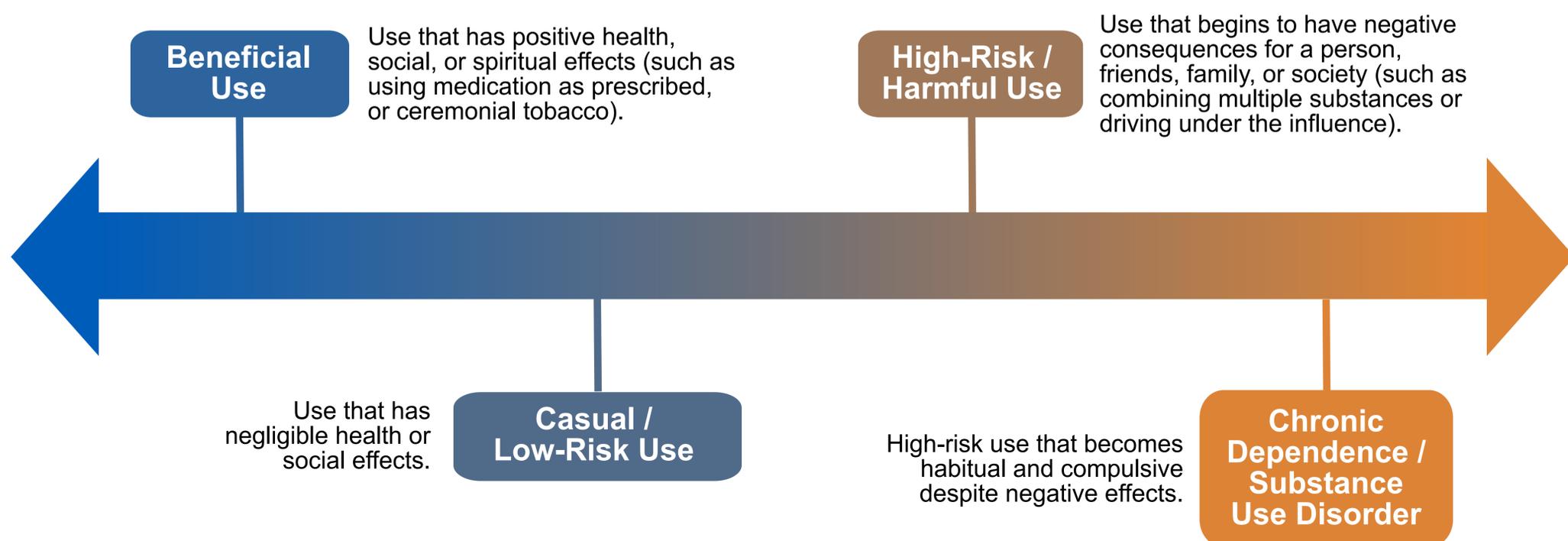


# Spectrum of Substance Use

Substance use can be viewed on a spectrum. Understanding where a person is on this spectrum is important for meeting people where they are at, and providing appropriate care options that promote health and reduce risk or harm.

A harm reduction approach can be applied at any point along the spectrum. If you understand how someone views their substance use on this spectrum, you can then foster conversations around supporting their goals and the plan for care.



## A few things to note about this spectrum:

The spectrum is not a diagnostic tool for healthcare providers to determine whether substance use is problematic. It is a tool for the person seeking care to communicate how they view their substance use. Note that an individual's journey may involve them jumping between points along the spectrum.



People do not automatically move along the spectrum. Someone may use substances casually for years, and never progress to harmful use.



There is risk at every point along the spectrum. There is also opportunity to address and reduce this risk without necessarily reducing use.



People can be at different points on the spectrum for different substances and at different times.



For people who use substances, it is normal to return to use after periods of abstinence.



People may start using for one reason and continue using for another. For example, they may start using to help them deal with difficult emotions or experiences, and continue using to prevent withdrawal.



When a person has a substance use disorder, their brain structure changes. It then becomes necessary to use to feel normal and avoid withdrawal symptoms.

## References

- American Society of Addiction Medicine. (2013). *Terminology related to the spectrum of unhealthy substance use*. Retrieved from <https://www.asam.org/docs/default-source/public-policy-statements/1-terminology-spectrum-sud-7-13.pdf?sfvrsn=2>
- British Columbia Ministry of Health. (2017). *Provincial guidelines for biopsychosocialspiritual withdrawal management services: Adult*. Retrieved from <http://www.health.gov.bc.ca/library/publications/year/2017/adult-withdrawal-management-services-guidelines-final.pdf>
- Canadian Mental Health Association Ontario. (2019). *Substance use and addiction*. Retrieved from <http://ontario.cmha.ca/addiction-and-substance-misuse/>
- Spectrum of Psychoactive Substance Use. (2005). Adapted from *A public health approach to drug control in Canada* (page 5), by Health Officers Council of British Columbia. Retrieved from <http://www.cfdp.ca/bchoc.pdf>
- United States Department of Health and Human Services. (1999). *Blending perspectives and building common ground: The spectrum of substance use, abuse, and addiction*. Retrieved from <https://aspe.hhs.gov/report/blending-perspectives-and-building-common-ground/spectrum-substance-use-abuse-and-addiction>