

# Understanding volatile substance abuse

Talking about glues,  
gases and aerosols

By John Verity & Simon Monks



**If you are reading this because you are worried about somebody's use of gases, glues or aerosols, you're probably looking for someone or something that can help you.**

**Reading this booklet may take a little while, but we hope that it will help you to gain a better understanding of the unique nature of using gases, glues and aerosols to get "high".**

You may feel, though, that you need help right now and want to know where to get that help.

### **Where can I get help and what sort of help is there?**

You may have people on whom you can rely for support when the need arises. You may already have talked to them about your concerns. You may feel, though, that you need more specialised help from a person or agency.

### **What can agencies do?**

A drugs agency will be able to give you help, advice and information about the problem. They may refer you to other sources of help, such as parent support groups. They may also be able to work with the person you're concerned about.

## So, what agencies are there and how can I contact them?

It depends on where you are in the UK. Most places will have a local drug service and there are some national organisations that can help.

Your local authority/council should be able to inform you about a range of Drug Services (including Young Peoples' services) in your area.

Looking under “Drugs” in on the internet/the Phone Book may also help and Citizens Advice Bureaux and libraries will also have useful ‘phone numbers and contact details.

**National organisations such as these should also be able to put you in touch with services in your area:**

- FRANK 0800 77 66 00
- DRUGSCOPE 08707 74 36 82
- Re-Solv 01785 810762

## How can this booklet help?

Reading this booklet will not enable you to work miracles, nor will it enable you instantly to discuss a very “touchy” and emotive subject with someone who doesn’t actually want to talk to you for any number of reasons. This booklet won’t give you a list of tell-tale signs that will confirm your suspicions that someone you know is using gases, glues or aerosols to get “high”. What it can do is to help you to cope better by getting things in perspective and by giving you a way of dealing with the thoughts, feelings and emotions that occur when you think you are dealing with someone who is involved in volatile substance abuse.

**Here are some websites that may also be useful:**

- [www.talktoFRANK.com](http://www.talktoFRANK.com)
- Re-Solv <http://www.re-solv.org/>
- [www.erowid.org](http://www.erowid.org)
- [www.adfam.org.uk](http://www.adfam.org.uk)
- [www.drugscope.org.uk](http://www.drugscope.org.uk)

## Volatile substance abuse?

### What is that?

Glue, gas and aerosol sniffing is sometimes known as “volatile substance abuse” or “solvent abuse”. It is: the deliberate inhalation of the volatile vapours from a range of substances with the intention of getting “high” or intoxicated.

### What substances are we talking about?

There are many volatile substances in most peoples' houses that could be abused. Common ones include:

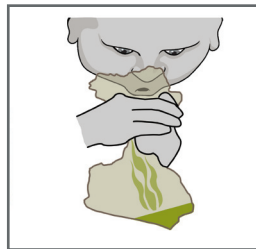
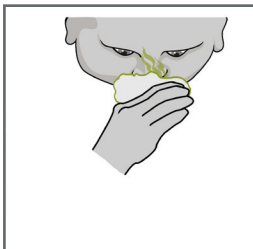
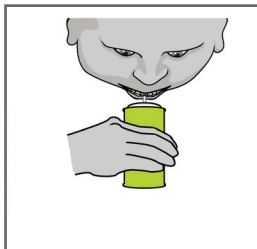
butane gas lighter refills, deodorant sprays, hairsprays, nail varnish, petrol, furniture polish, some glues, paint thinners

A comprehensive list would be practically impossible to draw up, but it's probably fair to say that people abusing volatile substances will be using one of these products.



## How do you “sniff” one of these substances?

“Sniffing” is probably a misleading word when we think about how these substances are used because it makes us think that the vapours enter the body through the nose alone. Gases, glues and aerosols are, in fact, more likely to be inhaled through the mouth and nose together, or just through the mouth.



- Some are inhaled directly by placing the nozzle of the aerosol between the teeth and pushing the can against them (butane lighter refills are usually sniffed in this way).

- Others are sprayed onto a sleeve, a towel or something else that is absorbent. This is then held over the nose and mouth and the vapours are breathed in (deodorant sprays are often sniffed in this way).

- A third way of sniffing is to spray or pour a substance into a plastic bag, such as a freezer bag or an empty crisp packet, and then hold this over the nose and mouth so that the vapours are breathed in (nail varnish could be sniffed in this way).

## So, what are the effects of sniffing?

Because they are inhaled gases, glues and aerosols have an almost immediate, though short-lived, effect. The speed at which users feel the effect may come as a surprise, particularly to those who have not experienced being “high” before. Their speech may be slurred and their co-ordination is affected. Some users experience hallucinations. When they are inhaled gases, glues and aerosols have a depressant effect on the user’s central nervous system. Putting it simply, they slow things down. Some users describe the effects as similar to being drunk on alcohol. By and large the effects wear off ten to twenty minutes after a person has stopped sniffing. To keep feeling the effects a person has to carry on inhaling the substance.

## Are there risks involved in sniffing?

You will not be surprised to find out that there are risks involved with the sniffing of gases, glues and aerosols. You may have heard some shocking stories about sniffing; you may also have seen things in the newspapers or on television.

Sniffing is no different than using other drugs in that it alters the way you think and feel. This can affect your judgment, leaving people more prone to accidents. All drug use involves some risk, even those drugs that are legal to use and those prescribed to us by a doctor.

A substance such as alcohol can be used safely and can even have benefits for the user, although excessive use can be dangerous. In hospitals heroin-type drugs are used to relieve pain in a controlled way, with little risk.

**“So, some drugs can be used relatively safely. What is different about using gases, glues and aerosols to get “high” is that it is never safe.”**

## Using gases, glues and aerosols may change the way people think and feel, like other drugs, but it brings with it its own, unique, set of risks:

- Some people have died as a result of sniffing and some of those who died were first-time users. The most recent statistics show that 46 people died in 2009 in the UK as a result of volatile substance abuse. So, to say that sniffing gases, glues and aerosols is “too dangerous: don’t do it” is good advice, although some young people may choose to ignore it.

- When glues, gases and aerosols are sniffed they can cause the heart to beat irregularly (cardiac arrhythmia) and this may lead to heart failure.

(The risk of this happening is made worse if the user is further excited or agitated by, for example, physical exertion. So, if you come across someone who is sniffing it’s a good idea not to provoke them by, say, chasing them or trying to wrestle the substance from them.)

- “Sniffable” substances are usually inflammable. Accidents can and do happen easily when, for example, someone lights up a cigarette shortly after sniffing in a confined space.

As serious as these risks are, what we must do is to keep things in perspective. The overwhelming majority of people who sniff will do so for only a relatively short period of time and will come to little or no harm as a result. Sometimes just highlighting the dangers to someone may be enough to put them off trying in the first place or to persuade them to stop using. After all, around 90% of people never try sniffing, and of those that do, most don’t do it for long.

If you think you know someone who is experimenting with gases, glues or aerosols it may be enough for you to get some information together (perhaps with the help of a drug agency – look back to pages 2 and 3 of this booklet) and discuss it with the person you are concerned about.

## Why do people sniff, then?

We've already discovered that the majority of people who sniff will only do so for a short period of time. It's only natural to be curious and to experiment with things, particularly when we are young. Gases, glues and aerosols belong to a range of substances that people experiment with to change the way in which they see and feel things. The drugs that people most commonly experiment with are alcohol, tobacco and cannabis.

It may be hard to accept that, having tried sniffing, some people carry on doing it because they like it. They may like the "buzz" it gives them or they may like it because it helps them to cope with difficult things.

There are many, many reasons why people use gases, glues and aerosols: some simple, some complex. In fact, you could say that there are as many reasons as there are people, and it's likely that there will be more than just one reason for someone to do it.

Because of some of the things we've already discovered it is understandable that you are likely to see sniffing in a negative way. It is important to realise, though, that the user may see his or her use as a largely positive thing.

You may look for a way of dealing with things that fits your ideas as to why someone is using which is different from the way they see their use. It is not unusual for those who care about someone who is using glues, gases or aerosols to feel that they are to blame. In reality, as we have seen, people use for many different reasons. Looking to blame yourself will probably not help you or the person you care about.

## What can I do about it?

Before you go any further it may help you to think about why someone might be abusing gases, glues or aerosols. It may also be a good idea to jot down your thoughts.



## Making two lists could be helpful.

- In the first list write down why you think they are sniffing (remember there are probably a number of reasons).
- In the second list write down what reasons you think they would give if they were asked.

### My reasons

#### EXAMPLE:

*“S/he is easily led; s/he mixes with the wrong crowd”*

*“S/he likes to be a rebel”*

*“It’s something I have done wrong”*

### Their reasons

#### EXAMPLE:

*“I like the buzz, it’s exciting”*

*“We all do it, it’s a laugh”*

*“It helps me to chill out”*

You may have found it difficult, if not impossible, to fill in the list of their reasons for sniffing. Don’t worry, this isn’t surprising. No matter how open or close the relationship between you is there will always be things about each other that you don’t know. On the other hand you may have found it easy to do. If you did, is there a big difference between what you think and what you believe the person who sniffs thinks? Or, do you think they would agree with you? Either way, what do you do next?

## So, what do I do next?

Well, you've probably already decided that the only way you can begin to understand what the person thinks is by talking with them about it. This is sometimes more easily said than done and can depend on many things.

## Like what?

If you are concerned about someone who you think or know is sniffing gases, glues and aerosols there are a number of things to consider before you talk with them:

- **They may not wish to talk with you about the issue or see it as the “problem” that you’ve decided it is.**
- **If someone you care about is sniffing it may be hard for you to deal both with them and the issue in a calm way, without fear and panic.**

Unless you approach the issue in a calm way, without panic, then the likelihood is that you will struggle to achieve anything. There is also

the risk that you may aggravate the person and the situation. You could then find that it becomes more difficult to communicate. If you are unable to talk with someone it is less likely that you will be able to influence the situation.

One of the things that the person that you care about may not understand and may challenge you about is your own drug use and drug use in general. You may think that some drug use, such as drinking alcohol and smoking cigarettes, is acceptable, but to the person you are talking with this may seem just the same as their sniffing.

You may feel that some drugs are acceptable, whilst others are wholly unacceptable. This may be based on moral, practical or legal grounds. It may, perhaps, be based more on fear than understanding. Your views, opinions and feelings will influence the way you deal with the issue and what you want to happen.

Talking with people about sensitive subjects is rarely easy. There are no guarantees that they will even talk to you, never mind agree with you, which is probably what you will want them to do.

You will probably be as aware as anyone what helps and what hinders when it comes to communicating with someone you care about. Sometimes in our relationships, though, we get used to communicating only in certain ways at certain times and we tend to have fixed ideas about what the outcome will be.

So, it may be helpful to consider the following different ways of starting a conversation about the issue of solvent sniffing.

- **You may wait for the person you're worried about to bring the subject up**

**Advantages:** They want to talk about things and may, therefore, be more open about their thoughts and feelings and any concerns they have.

**Disadvantages:** It may never happen, or it may happen at a time when you least expect it and are not prepared for it.

**It may help to:** Make them aware that you will not over react if they wish to be open with you. It may also pay to find out as much as you can about drugs and drug use, particularly gases, glues and aerosols.

- **You may wait for the subject to crop up**

**Advantages:** This may mean that the discussion has a more natural, less “forced” feel. It may also enable a more thoughtful and considered conversation about some of the wider issues, especially if you have found out about drugs and drug use.

**Disadvantages:** It may happen at completely the wrong time, if it happens at all. You may feel unprepared and respond in a way you regret because of this.

**It may help to:** Save articles or video recordings around the issue, or look at television guides for programmes coming up that

may be relevant or may help to start a discussion. You may wish to use cuttings from newspapers or information leaflets to promote discussion and pass on important information about VSA.

- **You may react to an incident e.g. refusal to help around the home or anything that triggers your “Right! That’s it!” nerve.**

**Advantages:** It is immediate, it deals with the issue at once and there’s no beating round the bush.

**Disadvantages:** Both of you may be ill prepared, it may be more emotionally driven than a conversation when you have had time to think. It may be seen to be more critical and more one-sided; a “rant”, rather than a conversation.

**It may help to:** Be aware of situations, events and conversations that are likely to see you reach “flashpoint”. You may wish to avoid such situations, or be aware or think about what you are likely to say and how you will react in such a situation.

It may also help to have gathered information about the subject so that it does not necessarily turn into an irrational outburst and you are able to explain why you feel so strongly.

- **Talking when you think the time is right**

**Advantages:** With careful planning you can choose the time, the place and the setting that you think will give you both the best chance of communicating effectively. You will have had time to read up on the subject beforehand. You may be able to prepare yourself emotionally and, by arranging the time, place and circumstances of the conversation, so might the person you’re concerned about.

**Disadvantages:** It may all seem rather “rehearsed”; it may even feel like a lecture and be seen as a telling off. Regardless of how much you plan, the person you’re concerned about may not respond in the way you want, and you need to think about your reactions if this happens. You should

also bear in mind that there may never be a “right time”. It may not happen.

**It may help to:** Avoid accusations and to talk generally about your feelings and thoughts. It may also help to try to get an understanding of how they feel about themselves and life in general.

### **We've talked... What next?**

In real life things rarely turn out as ideally as you would like or plan for them to. You may find that what you thought could be achieved in a day may in reality take a good while longer. It may take a number of conversations before you get to the real issues that are concerning you. Perhaps you will feel as though you are never getting to the crux of the matter.

When considering the actions of someone you care about you may possibly find that you are looking for a “solution” to the problem when it may be more realistic to find the best compromise. More often than not major problems are coped with, rather than “solved” or “cured”.

### **So how do I cope?**

Different people will have different ways of coping with the problems that occur from time to time in life. You will have already developed ways of coping with the problems that have happened before in your own life. It may be worth thinking about what you have done to try to cope with such problems in the past.

Some ways of coping are beneficial, (for example joining a support group or taking exercise) some may help at first but, in the long term, may be damaging (for example drinking too much alcohol or eating for comfort).

The most effective ways of coping will be personal to you. It may help you to identify your effective ways of coping and to think about what you need to do if the problem you are currently facing seems endlessly huge.

### And remember...

The vast majority of people will never use gases, glues and aerosols to get intoxicated. Of those that do, most will only do so for a relatively short period of time. Although there was an overall year-on-year rise from 2008 to 2009 to 46 volatile substance related deaths, over the last two decades there has been a significant decline in deaths from a peak of 152 in 1990. This may be due to a number of reasons: perhaps fewer people are doing it in the first place; there may be a greater awareness of the dangers involved, so people may be reluctant to become involved at all and people may find that other drugs, notably alcohol and cannabis, are not only easier to obtain but also that their use is more acceptable to their peers.

There are no simple solutions to the problem of someone using gases glues and aerosols to get “high” but you may find that considering some of the issues we’ve looked at in this booklet, such as communication, raising awareness and looking for ways to cope, may help.

You may, of course, feel that you and everyone else affected can’t deal with all the feelings, thoughts and emotions that arise when you are concerned that someone you care about is using gases, glues and aerosols to get “high”.

So if at any time you feel that you need extra help, support, advice or information there are organisations listed on pages two and three of this booklet that can provide it or put you in contact with other people that may be able to help.

If you have never contacted a drug service or a similar service before you may well be concerned about things like confidentiality, cost and the sorts of things people will ask you. You will, perhaps, be relieved to discover that most services are free of charge, operate a confidentiality policy (so what you tell them stays with them) and will deal with drug issues in a sensitive and realistic way. If you do have concerns it may be worth ringing a service and finding out about these things by talking directly to the staff about them.

Finally, it may be reassuring to know that you are not alone when it comes to dealing with this issue and the support of those around you (including support from helping organisations) can be invaluable.

It is quite normal for relationships to have good and bad spells, although you may feel that at the time of reading this that things can not get much worse between you and someone you care about.

The good news is, however, that there is every chance that things will improve and that, for most people, problems and concerns about VSA last only for a short period before some positive change takes place.

## **In the meantime perhaps the best thing you can do is to:**

- acknowledge what is possible and what is not,
- take care of your own physical, emotional and mental health, and, importantly...
- try not to be too hard on yourself. Simple solutions are not easy to find when it comes to dealing with this complex subject.



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**[>]** aims  
To present the facts and give advice on dealing with a friend, relative or loved one who uses volatile substances.

**[>]** audience  
Parents, partners, friends and relatives of volatile substance users.

**[∨]** content  
No swearing or explicit content.

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