

# Substance Use Health Competencies for Prescribers

youth  
wellness  
hubs  
ONTARIO

carrefours  
bien-être  
pour les jeunes  
DE L'ONTARIO

The Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction (CCSA) developed prescriber-focused substance use health competencies for family physicians, nurse practitioners and other prescribers to standardize foundational practice across non-specialist and primary care settings<sup>1</sup>. The Substance Use Health Competencies for All Prescribers provides an overview of the knowledge, skills, and behaviors needed to deliver evidence-based, compassionate, empathic substance use health care<sup>1</sup>.

This includes:

- **Technical competencies:** foundational core clinical skills such as screening, assessment, pharmacotherapy, referral, and psychosocial interventions
- **Behavioral competencies:** humanizing substance use health care, practicing compassion and empathy, and practicing humility and self-reflection

Both sets of competencies are important, and it is important to understand that behavioral competencies influence the success of technical competencies.



To learn more about Integrating Workforce Competencies for Substance Use Health check out [Substance Use Health Competencies for Prescribers](#)



## Benefits of competencies<sup>1</sup>:

- Expands access to **evidence-based substance use health care** in non-specialist and primary care settings
- Promotes **consistency and standardization** in practice across Canada by ensuring all prescribers see substance use care as part of universal practice
- Strengthens **therapeutic relationships** by normalizing humanization, anti-stigma, and anti-racism as expectation for substance use health care experiences
- Embeds harm reduction philosophy into prescriber practice, ensuring services are **dignified, person-centered, and trust-building**



## Technical Competencies

- Understanding Substance Use
- Screening and Assessment for Substance Use Concerns
- Referral to Services and Providing Substance Use Care
- Pharmacotherapy for Opiate Use Disorder
- Pharmacotherapy for Alcohol Use Disorder
- Psychosocial Interventions for Substance Use Care

## Behavioural Competencies

- Humanizes Substance Use Health Care
- Practices Compassion and Empathy
- Practices Humility and Self-Reflection



## Practical Considerations for Clinicians:

- Utilize the competencies to **improve your understanding of the skills and knowledge** you need to enhance your substance use health care practice
- Invite **conversations about substance use** and **normalize the existence of substance use** within the environments, society, and individuals without judgement
- **Invest time developing behavioral competencies** as it is particularly important when working with youth
- **Acknowledge the full human experience beyond a youth's substance use** by considering life events, circumstances and the personal journey that brought them to connect with you
- Actively **engage in unlearning biases, recognizing power dynamics and practicing reflexivity** to ensure we are acknowledging individual's positionality within the clinical setting

## References

1. Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction. (n.d.). Substance use health competencies for all prescribers. Workforce Competencies. <https://competencies.ccsa.ca/en/job-clusters/substance-use-health-competencies-all-prescribers>

Last updated: November 2025



Canadian Centre  
on Substance Use  
and Addiction

Content adapted from a presentation by Miguel Andres Hernandez-Basurto, Senior Knowledge Broker at CCSA titled Substance Use Health Competencies for Prescribers.