

UNDERSTANDING ADDICTION

It can be difficult to understand or accept that people who struggle with drugs or alcohol are battling addiction. However, it's a mistake to view addiction as a social or a moral problem rather than a medical one.

The common belief that people with addiction should use sheer willpower alone to defeat a drug or alcohol dependency is unhelpful and unfair.

We now know and understand the complex effects of drug and alcohol addiction on the brain, as well as the treatments that work to manage it.

What is addiction?

Addiction is a chronic, often relapsing, disease which can cause compulsive behaviour that is damaging to our physical and mental health, our social and professional lives, and the lives of those closest to us.

Drug and alcohol addiction arises due to changes in the brain caused by the abuse of those substances. While often the first time a person experiments with drugs or alcohol the decision is a voluntary one, over time, addiction caused by repeated or consistent drug and alcohol abuse can affect a person's self control and their ability to make rational or sound decisions while generating an intense physiological urge to feed their addiction.

It's because of the physical and structural changes in the brain caused by the onset of addiction that behavioural change is so difficult for people struggling with addiction.

Treatment

Despite the seemingly impossible task of beating addiction, there are treatments available which can help to undo or counteract the powerful urges caused by drug or alcohol addiction. Research shows that by combining addiction treatment medication (if available or suitable in specific cases) with behavioural therapy is the best way to successfully treat addiction in most patients.

Treatment needs to be tailored to the patient's pattern of drug or alcohol abuse and take in to account any concurrent mental health, social or physiological considerations of the patient.

Relapse

As with many other chronic diseases or lifelong illnesses (such as diabetes, asthma, heart disease or obesity), people with a drug or alcohol addiction can face relapse, and the abuse of drugs or alcohol might start again. Relapse doesn't signal failure; instead, it indicates to the patient and their loved ones that treatment should be reinstated or adjusted or that a different course of treatment is needed to help regain control and recover.

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Why do some people become addicted and others don't?

There's no single factor and no easy answer for why some people become addicted to drugs or alcohol while others do not. Risk factors for addiction include a person's biology, their social environment, their age or stage of physical development, along with other comorbidities like mental illness can sometimes have an impact.

There are also many people who struggle with one form of addiction but not another. A lifelong nicotine addict for example might be able to manage their consumption of alcohol without it becoming harmful or falling into the category of "addiction".

Biology and Gender

Men are more likely than women to use almost all types of illicit drugs and are also more likely to die or be admitted to hospital for an overdose on illicit drugs.

They are also more likely to binge drink than women, but the long term effects of alcoholism on women's physical health is greater than on men's.

On the other hand, studies have shown that women can be more susceptible to craving and relapse than men, which are key phases of the addiction cycle.

Ethnicity and genetics can also make a difference to the rate of metabolism for some drugs or alcohol, which can affect sensitivity.

Environment

Our home and family life, the availability of drugs or alcohol and the behaviours modelled to us as adolescents by older siblings or parents can all be risk factors for addiction.

Stress, and early exposure to stress, is linked to drug and alcohol abuse. So too is experiencing or witnessing violence or physical and sexual abuse.

Peer pressure, cultural factors and workplace norms or even professional pressures that affect your mental health can also drive or initiate drug and alcohol consumption that may lead to addiction.

Prevention and Support is key

Drug and alcohol addiction is a preventable disease. Research shows us that prevention programs which involve the family, schools, communities and the media are effective in reducing drug and alcohol abuse, especially when they are targeted at young people and adolescents. It's also important to foster a workplace culture which doesn't apply pressure on people to engage in illicit drug taking or binge drinking as a way to fit in.

Patients dealing with addiction need the support of friends, family and their workplaces to make long term changes in their behaviour and to manage their physiological responses to drugs or alcohol.

It is important to be aware that suddenly stopping the use of alcohol and other drugs can in fact be dangerous and cause further harm.

You can discuss your options with a health professional or a drug and alcohol service or seek advice on behalf of a third party who you might be providing support to.

If you are supporting someone who is struggling with a drug or alcohol addiction, it is also important to manage your own mental health and wellbeing by contacting a professional counselling service.

