



ADDICTION

WHAT IS ADDICTION?

The word “addiction” is often used to refer to any behaviour that is out of control in some way. People often describe themselves as being “addicted to”, for example, a TV show or shopping.

Addiction is also used to explain the experience of withdrawal when a substance or behaviour is stopped (e.g. “I must be addicted to coffee: I get a headache when I don’t have my cup in the morning”). However, experiencing enjoyment or going through withdrawal do not necessarily mean a person has an addiction. Because the term “addiction” is often used a vague way, there have been many attempts to define it more clearly.

Additionally, approximately half of those who have problematic substance use have a concurrent mental health issue.¹

WHY DO PEOPLE KEEP USING?

Substance use can be hard to change. One thing that makes change so difficult is that the immediate effects of substance use tend to be positive. The person may feel good, have more confidence, and forget about his or her problems. The problems caused by substance use might not be obvious for some time.

The person may come to rely on substances to bring short-term relief from difficult or painful feelings. The effects of substances can make problems seem less important, or make it seem easier to interact with others. The person may come to believe that they



A simple way of describing addiction is the presence of the 4 Cs:

- ✓ Craving
- ✓ Loss of control
- ✓ Compulsion to use
- ✓ Use despite consequences.



cannot function or make it through the day without drugs or alcohol. When the person uses substances to escape or change the way they feel, using can become a habit, which can be hard to break.

Continued substance use, especially heavy use, can cause changes in the body and brain. If a person develops physical dependence and then stops using, they may experience distressing symptoms of withdrawal. Changes to the brain may be lasting. These changes may be why people continue to crave substances and slip back into substance use long after they have stopped using.

WHAT ARE THE SIGNS OF ADDICTION?

Two important signs that a person's substance use is risky, or is already a problem: 1) harmful consequences; and 2) loss of control.



Harmful consequences

The harms of substance use can range from mild (e.g., feeling hungover, being late for work) to severe (e.g., homelessness, disease). While each time a person uses a substance may seem to have little impact, the harmful consequences can build up over time. A person who keeps using substances despite the harmful consequences may develop a substance use problem.

The harms of substance use can affect every aspect of a person's life. They include:

- ✓ Injuries while under the influence;
- ✓ Feelings of anxiety, irritability or depression;
- ✓ Trouble thinking clearly;
- ✓ Blackouts;
- ✓ Problems with relationships;
- ✓ Spending money on substances rather than on food, rent, or other essentials;
- ✓ Legal problems related to substance use;
- ✓ Loss of hope, feelings of emptiness.



Loss of control

Some people may be aware that their substance use causes problems but continue to use, even when they want to stop. They may use more than they intended or in situations where they did not want to use.

Some people may not see that their substance use is out of control and is causing problems. This is often referred to as being in denial. This so-called denial, however, may simply be a lack of awareness or insight into the situation. Whether people realize it or not, lack of control is another sign that substance use is a problem.

WHAT IS THE TREATMENT FOR ADDICTION?

There is no “one size fits all” approach to addiction treatment. Choosing the appropriate treatment depends on the severity and type of addiction; the support available from family, friends and others; and the person’s motivation to change. If you or someone you know is suffering, please seek a professional who will be able to develop a treatment plan with you. The following are some options you may want to explore with your treatment provider:



Self-change

Some people with substance use problems are able to make changes on their own using self-help materials (e.g., self-help books and websites).



Self-help groups

Self-help groups—also called mutual aid groups—support people who are working to change their substance use. Many people participate in a self-help group at the same time that they are in formal treatment. The oldest and largest self-help organization is Alcoholics Anonymous (AA). Today, there are many self-help groups with various philosophies and approaches for people with substance use problems.



Harm reduction

To reach out to people who may not be ready, willing or able to give up substances, some treatment programs have adopted a harm reduction approach. Examples of harm reduction strategies include:

- ✓ Helping people learn safer ways to use substances;
- ✓ Helping people learn how to recognize the signs of an overdose;
- ✓ Helping to ensure that people's basic needs, such as for food, shelter and medical care, are met;
- ✓ Providing clean needles and other injection equipment for injection drug use (to reduce transmission of infections such as HIV/AIDS through needle sharing);
- ✓ Substituting a safer drug for the one a person is using (e.g., substituting methadone for heroin)



Counselling

Counselling comes in a variety of forms, including individual, group, couples and family therapy. Counselling generally aims to:

- ✓ Increase people's awareness of how substance use affects their lives, what puts them at risk, and how to reduce substance use;
- ✓ Help promote physical, emotional and spiritual wellness;
- ✓ Help people develop healthy lifestyles;
- ✓ Help people examine their thoughts and emotions and learn how inner experiences affect how they behave, how they interact with others, and how others see them;
- ✓ Help people manage cravings and temptations to use substances;
- ✓ Help people with substance use problems meet their needs through assertive communication;
- ✓ Help people find ways to form relationships that are not focused on substance use; *and*
- ✓ Reduce stress.



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¹COOPER, G., & KENT, C. (1997). HELPING CLIENTS WITH CONCURRENT DISORDERS. IN S. HARRISON & V. CARVER (EDS). ALCOHOL AND DRUG PROBLEMS: A PRACTICAL GUIDE FOR COUNSELORS (PP. 493-502). TORONTO: ADDICTION RESEARCH FOUNDATION.