

Addiction: How to Recognize It and What to Do about It

Addiction to alcohol and other drugs is a chronic disease. It is progressive, continuous, and long-term. Alcohol or drug abuse means that a person has control over whether he or she drinks or uses. Alcohol or drug dependence means that a person has lost all control over his or her drinking or using behavior.

Addictive Behavior

People who suffer from addictive diseases engage in compulsive behavior and gradually lose control of their lives. They continue to drink or use drugs, even when they know it will lead to negative consequences. They tend to have low self-esteem and almost inevitably suffer from anxiety and depression.

If someone in your life suffers from addictive disease, you have experienced his or her extreme behavior, ranging from depression to exhilaration. You probably have also experienced the person's state of denial ("I can quit anytime" or "I don't have a problem"), dishonesty, frequent disappointments, and the series of ruined relationships. These are the hallmark behaviors when a person suffers from addiction to alcohol or drugs.

Who Is Affected by Addictive Disease

Alcoholism and drug addiction affect people from all parts of society. Addictive disease affects rock stars, writers, artists, and homeless people. Victims also include stay-at-home moms, teenagers, and corporate executives. There are addicts who are students at top universities and physicians in your local hospital. They may be teachers at your neighborhood school or salespeople at the local hardware store.

Studies have shown that there is a genetic predisposition to alcoholism. About half of all alcoholics had an alcoholic parent. Men seem to be more vulnerable than women to the alcoholic traits of their parents. Women may be more affected by factors in the environment (such as financial and life circumstances) than by inherited factors.

The Physical Side of Addiction

Chronic alcohol abuse produces long-lasting damage in many areas of brain function. It damages the capacity for abstract thinking, problem solving, memory, and physical dexterity. It also impairs verbal, visual, and spatial ability. The extent of damage to brain tissue depends on the extent of heavy alcohol abuse. When the drinking stops, a certain amount of healing is possible.

Prescription Drugs

Prescription and illegal drugs with psychoactive side effects target the brain and can change a person's mood. This causes these drugs to be potentially addicting. Some people think that if a doctor has prescribed a drug, it is not addictive. This is not true.

It is important to tell your doctor if you:

- Are an alcoholic (using or in recovery)
- Have ever been addicted to any drug
- Have taken more than the prescribed dose of a prescribed drug
- Have taken a prescribed drug for a long time
- Take a prescribed drug with alcohol

Addictive disease is often progressive and can be fatal. Thankfully, with proper treatment, recovery is possible.

Treatment

The first phase of treatment of addictive disease focuses on the physical effects of alcohol or drug use. This phase can include detoxification or treating life-threatening disorders such as liver failure.

Since addictive disease is primarily a brain disease that results in behavioral symptoms, the main treatment is psychosocial therapy. Treatment usually focuses on the irrational feelings and distorted thinking that accompany chronic alcohol or drug abuse.

Alcoholism and drug addiction are chronic diseases that require a lifetime recovery plan. Most successful treatment plans include a focus on the 12 steps of Alcoholics Anonymous and involve ongoing, long-term participation in self-help groups. Patients who have been hospitalized for treatment may continue group and individual psychotherapy after they leave the hospital, in addition to attending 12-Step meetings.

Treatment of the Family

Addiction affects every member of the patient's family. As the disease progresses and the patient continues to drink or use, it causes a range of emotional, spiritual, and financial problems for almost everyone involved, including family, friends and coworkers. When the family is ready to begin the recovery process, Al-Anon and Alateen are excellent resources. A qualified family therapist who understands the process of addiction and recovery may also be consulted to work with the family.

What to Do When an Alcoholic or Addict Won't Stop

Sometimes the alcoholic or addict is in such a strong state of denial that the best alternative is to arrange an intervention. This process involves arranging for a professional interventionist to organize a meeting of the family, friends, and employer of the patient. The interventionist helps the group prepare a confrontation that will be followed by the patient entering a treatment center. The patient's family and friends usually write a brief statement describing how the drinking or drug use has affected them. The interventionist and the group then meet with the patient and read their statements to the patient with the guidance of the interventionist. These interventions, when managed by professionals from respected treatment organizations, often result in successful treatment of the addiction.