

Module 8: Substance abuse



What is substance abuse?

Drug addiction, also called substance use disorder, is a disease that affects a person's brain and behaviour and leads to an inability to control the use of a legal or illegal drug or medication.

Substances such as alcohol, marijuana and nicotine also are considered drugs. When you're addicted, you continue using the drug despite the harm it causes.



What is substance abuse? (continuation)

Drug addiction can start with experimental use of a recreational drug in social situations, and, for some people, the drug use becomes more frequent. For others, particularly with opioids, drug addiction begins with exposure to prescribed medications, or receiving medications from a friend or relative who has been prescribed the medication.

As time passes, you may need larger doses of the drug to get high. Soon you may need the drug just to feel good. As your drug use increases, you may find that it's increasingly difficult to go without the drug. Attempts to stop drug use may cause intense cravings and make you feel physically ill (withdrawal symptoms).

The risk of addiction and how fast you become addicted varies by drug. Some drugs, such as opioid painkillers, have a higher risk and cause addiction more quickly than others.

What is substance abuse? (continuation)

Commonly used substances include:

- Opiates and other narcotics are powerful painkillers that can cause drowsiness, and sometimes intense feelings of well-being, elation, happiness, excitement, and joy. These include heroin, opium, codeine, and narcotic pain medicines.
- Stimulants are drugs that stimulate the brain and nervous system. They include cocaine and amphetamines, such as drugs used to treat ADHD (methylphenidate, or Ritalin).
- Depressants cause drowsiness and reduce anxiety. They include alcohol, barbiturates, benzodiazepines (Valium, Ativan, Xanax), chloral hydrate, and paraldehyde. Using these substances can lead to addiction.
- LSD, mescaline, psilocybin ("mushrooms"), and phencyclidine (PCP, or "angel dust") can cause a person to see things that are not there (hallucinations) and can lead to psychological addiction.
- Marijuana (cannabis, or hashish).

What is substance abuse? (continuation)

There are several stages of drug use that may lead to addiction:

Experimental use: Typically involves peers, done for recreational use; the user may enjoy defying parents or other authority figures.

Regular use: The user misses more and more school or work; worries about losing drug source; uses drugs to "fix" negative feelings; begins to stay away from friends and family; may change friends to those who are regular users; shows increased tolerance and ability to "handle" the drug.

Problem or risky use: The user loses any motivation; does not care about school and work; has obvious behaviour changes. Thinking about drug use is more important than all other interests, including relationships.

Addiction: The user cannot face daily life without drugs; denies problem; physical condition gets worse; loss of "control" over use; may become suicidal; financial and legal problems get worse; may have broken ties with family members or friends.

Symptoms and behaviour

In all dependencies usually we can observe:

- damage to relationships
- poor work performance
- bad health performance

Concerning drug abuse, frequent behaviour symptoms are:

- increased aggression and irritability,
- changes in attitude/personality,
- sadness, lethargy, depression,
- great changes in habits/priorities and even engagement in criminal acts.



Symptoms and behaviour (continuation)

Symptoms and behaviours of drug use may include:

- Confusion
- Episodes of violence
- Hostility when confronted about drug dependence
- Lack of control over drug abuse, being unable to stop or reduce alcohol intake
- Making excuses to use drugs
- Missing work or school, or a decrease in performance
- Need for daily or regular drug use to function
- Neglecting to eat
- Not caring about physical appearance
- Continuing to use drugs, even when health, work, or family are being harmed
- No longer taking part in activities because of drug abuse
- Secretive behaviour to hide drug use

Treatment

Substance use disorder is a serious condition and not easy to treat.

The best care and treatment involves trained professionals.

Treatment begins with recognizing the problem. People who are addicted have far less denial if they are treated with empathy and respect, rather than told what to do or being confronted.



Treatment (continuation)

The substance may either be slowly withdrawn or stopped abruptly. Support for physical and emotional symptoms, as well as staying drug free (abstinence) are also key to treatment.

- People with drug overdose may need emergency treatment in the hospital. The exact treatment depends on the drug used.
- Detoxification (detox) is the withdrawal of the substance abruptly in an environment where there is good support. Detoxification can be done on an inpatient or outpatient basis.
- At times, another drug with a similar action or effect on the body is taken, as the dose is slowly decreased to reduce the side effects and risks of withdrawal. For example, for narcotic addiction, methadone or similar drugs may be used to prevent withdrawal and continued use.

Do you want to learn more?

Our interactive Resource Pack will give you information about

- concerns that you as caregiver might have
- what can be done
- useful tips how to handle the burden of care
- how to avoid stress and burnout
- how to deal with your emotions
- acceptance of the disorder
- and more!

You will also find exercises and activities for YOU and for the care receiver!



The Resource Pack will be available in May 2020!