



Addicted to Drugs

It is very challenging to try to explain addiction. Especially as a concerned loved one, it can be difficult to explain to yourself (let alone to others) how your child, your boyfriend, your sibling, became addicted to drugs. On the outside looking in, many people feel that substance addiction is a:

- Bad choice, in which someone should just say “no”
- Bad habit that just needs to be kicked
- Weakness, that someone can’t overcome the withdrawal symptoms
- Moral failing, that the person has given up

The fact is, drug addiction is none of the above. **It is a chronic disease of the brain** that cannot be overcome overnight, with a simple “no” or change of mind. If you are asking “*why do people get addicted to drugs*” or “*why did my child get addicted to drugs,*” it’s important to recognize this first.

More than likely, you have other questions like, “How did this happen?” Your loved one may have been raised right, on a solid moral foundation or in a good home, but still started using drugs. The truth is, there are many reasons that people use drugs, and many reasons that people become addicted. It’s important you do not blame yourself, or your loved one, before understanding the facts.

Why Do People Get Addicted to Drugs?

Often as concerned loved ones, we find ourselves asking things like, “Why do some people get addicted to drugs, and others do not?” It’s a valid question, and many people who use drugs don’t think they will become addicted. The truth is, anyone can become addicted to drugs, and there a variety of factors that put them at greater risk. Common risk factors, or potential causes of drug addiction, include:

- Stressful early life experiences, such as being abused or experiencing trauma
- History of physical or sexual abuse
- Genetic vulnerability (i.e. other family members struggle with addiction)
- Prenatal exposure to alcohol or other drugs while in the womb
- Lack of parental supervision or monitoring during adolescence
- Association with drug-using peers, or peer-pressure from friends or social circles
- Mental health disorders, such as depression and anxiety

As you can see, there are a mix of genetic and environmental influences that can make a person more vulnerable to addiction. According to the National Institute on Drug Abuse, genetics account for about **half** of a person’s likelihood to develop an addiction. So, environmental risk factors also play a big role: things like stress, trauma, abuse, lack of education, low-income neighbourhoods, high school parties.



People who use drugs during adolescence are also more likely to develop a drug addiction, because their brain is still in development. Exposing the brain to drugs during this critical time can leave lasting changes in the brain and create greater risk for dependence down the road. Research shows that almost 70 percent of adolescents who try an illicit drug before age 13 develop a clinical addiction within the next seven years. Those between ages 18 and 25 are also at great risk, while their brains mature. In fact, 9 out of 10 people who are battling substance addiction started using before their 18th birthday.

How Do People Get Addicted to Drugs?

Science has helped explain exactly how drug abuse affects people, and how addiction comes to be, over time. Through imaging and other advancing technologies, researchers have been able to actually “see” how substance addiction works in the brain.

It all starts with prolonged drug use. When a person uses drug repeatedly, it changes how the brain functions. Over time, the drug use becomes compulsive, not recreational or voluntary. It is no longer a choice to use drugs – it is no longer in their control. How is this, exactly?

When a person uses drugs, the brain releases a “pleasure chemical,” called dopamine. This results in a euphoric bodily response and mental state, in which the user feels good or high. When the brain experiences this repeatedly, it becomes reliant on that feel-good behavior. And so, it “hardwires” those euphoric, drug-using experiences into its circuitry – and using the drugs becomes its highest priority.

These are physical changes that take place. The brain’s reward system (a primitive system that exists to ensure we seek what we need) gets hardwired to prioritize drug use above all else – eating, sleeping, family, academics. Even when the drugs stop producing pleasure for a user (which happens over time, when a user becomes tolerant on them), the brain continues pushing this need. It produces intense cravings, which occur in the same part of the brain as one’s survival instinct. Thus, acting on these cravings (i.e. using drugs) becomes an overwhelming and dire need – the brain thinks it needs the drugs to function and survive.

At the same time the brain’s reward system is affected, so are the parts of the brain dedicated to judgment, decision-making, learning, and self-control. These physical changes make drug use even harder to quit, as a person loses their ability to make rational decisions and control impulses.

How Do People Overcome Drug Addiction?

Although drug addiction creates physical and chronic changes in the brain, there is good news. The brain can be re-wired again. Substance addiction is actually very treatable and manageable. Of course, this can’t happen overnight. Much like it took time for the person’s brain to re-wire in favor of drug use, it takes time for the brain to re-wire back to a healthier state.



Overcoming addiction requires modified routines and thought processes. It means replacing drug use with healthy behaviors like exercise and cooking. It also involves re-framing a person's outlook and definition of drug use – it is not a matter of survival, but a process of destruction. This requires education, combined with cognitive therapy to get to the root of their drug-using behaviors.

Over time, the brain can be taught to crave healthier behaviors and to dismiss drug cravings by considering the outcomes and alternatives. It can be taught to seek and prioritize meaningful relationships and activities, rather than drugs and alcohol. It can be taught this through abstinence, ongoing therapy, active management, cognitive reframing, and professional support.

Re-Framing Our Thinking

While professional drug treatment can help a person re-wire their brain back to a healthier state, we as loved ones have some re-wiring to do as well. We need to re-frame the way we think about addiction. By thinking that addiction is a choice, or a moral failing, we only prevent the ones we love from seeking help. In many cases of addiction, the person does not have the control or willpower to quit drugs and get help. They need your support and compassion to get there.

How to Help Someone Dealing With Addiction

Knowing someone who has an addiction is not uncommon, but knowing the best way to help a loved one with an addiction can be confusing and even scary. When someone has an addiction, it can affect every aspect of their lives as well as the lives of their loved ones. You will inevitably be concerned about your loved one, and it can be difficult to know what to do and what not to do, but it's important to remember that Recovery is a solution.

The Dos and Don'ts of Helping a Loved One With an Addiction

Once you've noticed **the signs of addiction** in your loved one — like an Alcohol Addiction or an Opioid Addiction, for example — you'll need to know how to talk to and treat them in a way that is positive and helpful. There are several ways to do this, some easy to practice and others that require a little more effort and understanding on your part. Here are a few dos and don'ts for helping a loved one deal with addiction:



Do: Have Compassion

Addiction is a disease. Normally, we wouldn't fault someone with a physical disease, like diabetes or cancer — instead, we would likely be compassionate and willing to help them survive their illness. Addiction deserves the same compassion and understanding. Recognize that addiction isn't a character flaw or a choice, but rather a disease

It's also crucial to understand there may be external factors that encourage an addiction, like stress or mental illness. Addiction is often a coping mechanism for stress, providing temporary relief. The fleetingness of the relief may contribute to repeatedly seeking out potentially destructive habits that develop over time into an Alcohol or Opioid Addiction.

When you're learning how to help an alcoholic family member or a loved one with any other type of addiction, being compassionate is also a great way to help build trust, which is crucial for successful, long-lasting Recovery.

Don't: Shame or Criticize

Human nature sometimes forces us to shift the blame because it's easier to understand a problem if we know its source. But the cause of addictions isn't so black and white, so there's never really just one thing to blame. Most importantly, the person with the addiction is not at fault for the disease.

Avoid implying or outright stating that your loved one is to blame for their addiction. Shaming or criticizing a family member who is struggling with an Alcohol Addiction or an Opioid Addiction is often counterproductive to their Recovery. While tough love may have a small part in helping an alcPart of practicing compassion for your loved one involves understanding that shaming your loved one may do them more harm than good. Instead, **talk with positivity and encouragement**, offering the idea of a



future of successful long-term Recovery. Provide verbal and physical encouragement rather than lectures or nagging.

Do: Expect Difficulties

Rehabilitation can be difficult — for you or your loved one. There are many reasons a person may be reluctant to seek treatment, including:

- **Shame:** They may feel like they will be looked down on or endanger their jobs and relationships by admitting to having an addiction.
- **Stigma:** Unfortunately, there is still a lot of stigma around diseases of the brain, like addiction and various mental illnesses, and your loved one may be unable or unwilling to expose themselves to it.
- **Denial:** Someone with an addiction may not be willing or able to admit that they have an addiction at all, let alone consider treatment.

There is also the risk of relapse, which can become a cloud of dread over you and your loved one. While it's always a possibility, it's hardly helpful to focus on it. Instead, focus on building positivity and encouragement.

Don't: Expect Immediate Change

How do you help an alcoholic? One of the best ways is to be realistic in your expectations. Long-term Recovery is not a quick fix. It's an ongoing process for your loved one that takes time, effort and continued support from professionals and family alike. Some treatments may work for some time and then need to be changed.

If one treatment doesn't work, it doesn't mean all treatments will fail. It just means you'll have to find the specific one that will work for your loved one.



Do: Educate Yourself

Knowledge is power, and educating yourself on addiction and treatment is a benefit when learning how to help someone with an addiction. If you're wondering how to help an alcoholic son, research alcoholism. Learn about the symptoms of an Alcohol Addiction as well as the treatments available. Educate yourself on the specific type of Recovery that your son is in, so you can better understand what he is going through and what sort of help he is receiving.

It's also useful to learn about addiction in general, finding out the answers to questions like:

- What is addiction?
- How does addiction occur?
- Why do some people become addicted?
- How is addiction treated? What are the **different treatment options**?
- **What is a holistic therapy**, and how does it work?

The more you know, the better you'll understand what is going on and be able to better help your loved one.

Don't: Enable Your Loved One

There can be a fine line between helping someone with an addiction and enabling them. Sometimes when we think we're protecting a loved one from the consequences of their addiction, we are actually enabling them to continue with potentially destructive behavior.

For example, if you're trying to figure out how to help an alcoholic, keeping them from drinking and driving is helpful, since that could put them and others in danger. However, consistently offering to drive them home whenever they get too intoxicated



is enabling their actions, because it's setting up a formula in which you are constantly available to rescue them.

Studies show that people with addictions are more likely to proactively seek treatment when they are forced to **face the consequences** of their actions. So, if you want to know how to help someone with an addiction, allow them to make mistakes without the promise of your rescue.

It's important to set up **boundaries and rules**, both for your well-being and the well-being of your loved one — and it's important to enforce those rules and boundaries. This is the only part of Recovery in which tough love is beneficial, since it's done for both you and your loved one's protection.

Do: Seek Counseling or Therapy

Addiction affects everyone, from the person in treatment to their loved ones. It's important to ensure you're well enough to manage the potential stress of helping someone dealing with addiction. Acknowledging that you may be in over your head and in need of professional help is normal and healthy. It's also necessary for you to help your loved one to the best of your abilities.

Don't: Give in to Manipulation

When a person with an addiction is unwilling to seek treatment, they will resort to whatever they need to do to continue feeding their addiction. This may include lying or trying to guilt the people who care for them. It's important to establish boundaries and **learn how to say no**. It may be very difficult to not react negatively or to stick to your established rules, but it's necessary for everyone involved.



Do: Take Care of Yourself

Indulging in self-care is not selfish, especially when you're helping someone dealing with addiction. You cannot let the addiction of your loved one derail your own life. Continue with healthy activities, like hobbies and social outings, and take care to look after yourself. Therapy or counseling is part of that process, but indulging in activities that aren't centered around your loved one is necessary. Determine what it is that you need to keep yourself well and indulge in it.

Don't: Violate Their Privacy

In taking care of yourself and attending therapy, you may be tempted to vent about your loved one with an addiction. While you should be as honest about your feelings as possible when getting therapy, it's important to respect their privacy. This is especially relevant when discussing someone with addiction with friends or family.

Make sure the person is okay being talked about and having their struggles discussed. If you attend counseling with your loved one, make sure you don't reveal what was said in session to others. If your loved one attends therapy or counseling on their own and don't want to discuss what they talked about in session, respect that and don't push them for details.