



Life Lines

Improving your quality of life, one step at a time

Issue #9:

ADDICTION & RECOVERY



Regardless of income, race, colour, religion or gender, addiction does not discriminate and may affect anyone. Recovering from addiction is a lifelong journey where individuals are faced with varying obstacles and challenges throughout everyday life. The courage and strength of those recovering from addiction is unprecedented, as they often face discrimination and stigmas while maintaining their sobriety. With the majority of individuals never facing or being directly impacted by addiction, it may be difficult to understand the daily challenges individuals with an addiction face. The recognition that addiction is not an individual issue, but a societal concern, is a simple truth. With addiction being more prevalent than diabetes, it is important to be educated on what addiction is, and how those in recovery maintain their sobriety.

What is addiction?

To better understand what addiction is, and when treatment may be needed, it is helpful to understand what constitutes an addiction. According to World Health Organization, addiction classification must include three of the following criteria:¹

1. **Tolerance.** Does the individual increase use or exposure to the substance or activity?
2. **Withdrawal.** Has the individual experienced physical or emotional withdrawal when they have stopped using the substance or withdrawn from the activity (i.e. anxiety, irritability, shakes, sweats, nausea, vomiting)?
3. **Limited control.** Has the individual sometimes drunk or used drugs more than they would like? Do they sometimes drink to get drunk? Does one drink lead to more drinks sometimes? Do they ever regret how much they have used the following day?
4. **Negative consequences.** Have they continued to use or participate even though there have been negative consequences to their mood, self-esteem, health, job, or relationships?



5. **Significant time or energy spent.** Has the individual spent significant time in obtaining, using, concealing, planning, or recovering from their use? Have they spent a lot of time thinking about using or participating in addictive behaviours? Have they ever concealed or minimized their use? Have they ever thought of schemes to avoid getting caught?
6. **Desire to cut down.** Has the individual thought about controlling their use or limiting their activity? Have they ever made unsuccessful attempts to control their use or limit their activity?

If the answer is yes for three of the above criteria, you or the individual in question may be experiencing addictive behaviour. Realizing the first step is acknowledgement, and recognizing that support is needed in addressing the addiction are courageous beginnings to the recovery journey.

What causes addiction?

There are various causes that can contribute to an individual developing an addiction. The most common reasons often result from:¹

Family history. Genetics can predict about 50 percent of whether an individual will develop an addiction. A study of identical twins both living together and apart to remove environmental factors helped to support this theory. When one identical twin was addicted to a substance; the other had a higher probability of being an addict as well. However, when looking at non-identical twins, if one of the non-identical twins was an addict, the other twin did not exhibit a higher likelihood of developing an addiction. Based on the difference between the identical and non-identical twins, the study was able to show that 50 to 60 percent of addiction is due to genetic factors.^{2,3}

Poor coping skills when dealing with stress. Stress is an important indicator of risk in addictions. Stress can cause those who are moderate users, to migrate to a more dependent and constant use of drugs or alcohol. The more stressed you are as an individual, the more likely to seek escape or to relax, which is why many people turn to drugs or alcohol. Additionally, when stressed, we tend to do what is familiar and sometimes wrong instead of what is new and right. This can cause individuals to relapse to their previous addictions when dealing with stress.⁴

Negative thinking. All types of negative thinking, a thought process where people tend to find the worst in everything, or reduce their expectations by considering the worst possible scenarios can make individuals feel uncomfortable, irritable, stressed, or discontent with life. When thoughts are all-or-nothing, individuals see life and options as either perfect or terrible. Feelings like these encourage escape, relaxation, or reward which may lead to the use of drugs or alcohol or participation in addictive behaviours.

Underlying anxiety and/or depression. Approximately 15 to 30 percent of individuals with addiction also suffer from underlying anxiety and/or depression. Anxiety and/or depressive disorders can lead to addiction if left untreated. Addictions can also cause an individual to experience anxiety and depression, which perpetuates a cycle of symptoms to addiction and addiction to symptoms. The individual suffering an addiction can be stuck in a repeating sequence of recovery and relapse when experiencing anxious or depressive episodes.^{6,7}

What options exist?

There are numerous options available to those seeking help with their addiction:⁷

1. **Inpatient / Residential treatment.** These facilities typically offer structured programs that take place at a hospital, recovery centre or a private facility. Individuals who are experiencing high levels of dependency would be appropriate for these types of facilities. Most inpatient treatment programs require a standard detox period of 30 to 60 days before entering.
2. **Outpatient treatment.** This type of facility is often a clinic or office which has structured times or group sessions in which an individual obtains treatment. Individuals who are experiencing mild to medium levels of addiction would be appropriate for outpatient treatment. This form of treatment allows individuals to maintain work accountabilities while living at home during recovery.

3. **Detox centre.** When an individual is experiencing withdrawal from their addiction, detox centres offer a safe place for the individual to reduce use or participation in addictive actions or behaviours. This is often done prior to an individual entering an inpatient treatment facility. In some cases, medication-assisted therapy is required to help ease the severity of withdrawal symptoms. Medications prescribed during detox are often slowly tapered down until the patient is no longer physically dependent on the addictive substance.

4. **Community and group therapy.** One of the most important things that an individual needs to know is to seek help when needed. Regardless of the support needed, mental health or academic related, it is important to talk through the challenges they are facing in order to overcome them. Speaking about challenges can help the individual process their feelings, bring logic to the situation, and help come up with solutions to overcome the current situation, and prevent it from happening again.

Life after treatment: Advice for maintaining sobriety.

There will be times when a friend, family, or co-worker returns from treatment. They may be in recovery and actively in the process of developing new routines and/or habits at home and at work to break old patterns of negative behaviour.

Habits can be described as behavioural patterns where one action has been repeated so often that it becomes automatic. There is an element of conscious choice in a habit. When you repeatedly perform an act, it becomes an automatic response of the brain.

Addictions are chronic diseases of the brain which arise from habits. Addictions are extreme forms of habits. An addicted person does not have any control over their impulses and is sometimes not conscious of their addiction.

Todd Ware is an Addictions Counsellor with the Homewood Clinic in Vancouver. Todd encourages transparency and supportiveness in the household and workplace.

“Try to cultivate an open door policy. It’s important for individuals to feel safe to admit when they are having health problems, whether mental or physical,” Todd says. “Instead of feeling like they’ve been caught, individuals with health problems should feel comfortable coming forward to ask for

help.”

For employers and managers, he adds: “make clear what supports your organization has in place in terms of:

- health and safety standards;
- the transition to treatment;
- job protection during treatment; and
- support upon returning from treatment.”

When in recovery, there are milestones one may use to measure progress in their efforts to sustain recovery. Todd emphasizes that each individual should work with their therapist or treatment provider to develop an individualized definition of success:

- What behaviours are you working to maintain going forward?
- What behaviours are you determined to keep in the past?
- How will you strengthen connections to family members or friends?

“Building self-esteem is important to continued success in recovery,” explains Todd. “Having a sense of belonging, family support and integration into the work community helps to maintain positive habits after treatment and also maintains productivity at work.”

How to support someone in recovery?

Being in recovery is a permanent state for the individual and the people who are supporting them. If you are involved with someone who is recovering from an addiction, here are some principles to live by:⁸

1. **Addiction is a disease.** This is important to understand as someone who is supporting an addict. It means knowing you are not supporting someone with a character flaw or who is morally impaired. Addiction is both a medical and psychological disorder, and long-term use of drugs and/or alcohol can physically change the size and structure of brain cells. This in-turn changes the individual’s ability to manage their impulses related to substance use and abuse. Being angry at the disease itself is understandable, but anger or blaming of the individual is not helpful in supporting their continued recovery.

- 2. Learn to recognize the signs of relapse.** Depending on their drug of choice, or addictive behaviour, relapse signs may vary. Notice when the individual may seem off, especially if that off feeling persists. Educate yourself about their addiction, and do not be afraid to speak up.
- 3. Listen.** Be there to support and listen when needed. This can mean picking up the phone no matter what time of day, answering all texts, or just hearing what they have to say when they need to talk. You do not have to “fix” anything, the simple act of listening is often well received and a big help.
- 4. Engage in healthy habits with them.** Being there to show positive lifestyle changes can help those in recovery feel better. Small things like making better meal choices, or becoming active through physical or leisure activities are all positive lifestyle choices. Be sure to avoid places or actions that could cause a relapse.
- 5. Be supportive.** Helping an individual to get to their 12-step meetings and support groups, or attending with them, can help to show that you are there for them. This can help to keep individuals accountable for showing up and provides an opportunity to demonstrate support for recovery.
- 6. Be patient.** Recovery isn't easy. Changes won't happen overnight. Relapse can occur and your loved one may not always be wholly focused or happy about living in sobriety. This is normal! Sticking through the ups and downs can help to get through whatever distractions or obstacles may occur as the individual grows into their new life in recovery. Remember to take care of yourself throughout the recovery process.

Addiction and recovery are never-ending. It isn't easy, but you are doing something that most people could never do.

If you or a loved one have questions about addiction and/or recovery options, speak to your primary physician or a qualified medical practitioner, local agencies within your community, or contact your Employee Family Assistance Program for the options available to you.

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