

Let's Talk About: Addictions

An Introduction to Drug Addiction Issues



ST. PAUL'S HOSPITAL
COMMUNITY FORUMS

What is Addiction?

Addiction is a habit that is often hard to stop and that increasingly interferes with a person's life. The habit could involve a substance such as alcohol or another drug, or an activity such as gambling.

Not everyone agrees about the exact meaning of addiction, but the checklists for determining if someone has an addiction usually include these items:

- the person cannot stop the substance use or the activity, despite trying to stop again and again
- the substance or the activity has become the focus (or preoccupation) of the person's life
- the person continues the use or activity despite severe negative consequences, (e.g., imprisonment or financial disaster).

How Common is Addiction?

According to the World Health Organization:

- 76.3 million people worldwide have alcohol use disorders
- At least 15.3 million people worldwide have drug use disorders
- Approximately one third of the world's population over the age of 15 smoke tobacco.

In Canada, the rate of drug use by youth 15-24 years of age remains much higher than that reported by adults 25 years and older: three times higher for cannabis use (25.1% versus 7.9%), and almost nine times higher for past-year use of any drug excluding cannabis (7.9% versus 0.8%).

What Causes Addiction?

It's puzzling why some people become addicted and others do not. No single answer has been found.

It seems that people develop addictions through a mixture of factors such as:

- genes
- the way a person's brain works
- difficulties during childhood

- mental health problems
- stress
- cultural influences.

While researchers continue to study the mysteries of addiction, some things are clear: nobody chooses to become addicted, and addiction is not simply due to personal weakness or character flaws.

Addiction Affects Both Mind and Body

Addiction is sometimes referred to as "dependence." When it comes to substance use, there are two kinds of dependence:

Psychological dependence occurs when a person feels he or she needs the drug to function or feel comfortable.

Physical dependence occurs when a person's body has become used to the presence of a drug. *Tolerance* has developed, which means that the person needs to use more of the drug to get the same effect. When the person stops using the drug, symptoms of *withdrawal* occur.

People often think that psychological dependence is not as serious as physical dependence. This is not necessarily true. Cocaine, for example, does not cause physical dependence, but it is considered one of the easiest drugs to get hooked on and one of the hardest to give up.

What are the Signs of Addiction?

Someone does not have to show clear signs of a problem to have an addiction. Even people close to someone with an addiction may not be aware of the person's problem for some time.

The signs of an addiction vary widely, depending on the problem and the person. In general, a substance use or an activity is a problem when it:

- affects a person's mental and physical health

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- involves breaking the law (e.g., drinking and driving, using illegal drugs or stealing money to gamble)
- causes financial difficulties
- harms relationships and friends
- causes problems at home, work or school.

What are Concurrent Disorders?

Concurrent disorders is a term used when a person has both a substance related disorder and a mental health disorder.

It's common for someone to have both conditions, for a number of reasons:

- some of the risk factors for substance use problems are the same as those for developing a mental disorder, e.g., childhood neglect
- someone with a mental disorder may use substances to cope with the symptoms of the disorder, e.g., someone with an anxiety disorder may use alcohol to feel more at ease in social situations
- problem substance use may lead to conditions that put a person at risk of mental illness, e.g., homelessness and isolation that result from substance use may lead to major depression.

How is Addiction Treated?

People may think they can just stop using a drug or stop gambling on their own. Although some people can, it's usually not easy. Treatment programs and support groups can help reduce or eliminate the substance use or the activity.

Since different factors lead different people to addiction, no single type of treatment will work for everyone. There are also different types of treatment for different substances.

Meeting with a trained counsellor for an addiction assessment is a good way to start looking for help. The assessment helps to identify a person's problems and strengths, and to figure out what treatment approach and level of support best suits each person.

In the past, substance use problems and mental illnesses were treated separately. People with both types of problems often "fell through the cracks" of the system.

Today, there are treatment programs that make sure people with concurrent disorders receive treatment for both types of problems.

Harm Reduction:

Harm reduction refers to an approach designed to reduce drug-related harm without having to stop the drug use.

Harm reduction is usually directed to people who are already experiencing some harm due to their substance use. The idea is to move from more to less harm.

InSite:

Insite is a safe, health-focused place where people inject drugs and connect to health care services – from primary care to treat disease and infection, to addiction counselling and treatment, to housing and community supports.

Insite operates on a harm-reduction model, which means it strives to decrease the adverse health, social and economic consequences of drug use without requiring abstinence from drug use.

Providence Crosstown Clinic:

The clinic offers an optimized methadone maintenance program that is targeted toward patients who have not found other opiate addiction treatments helpful. On-site pharmacy, doctors, nurses, social workers and addictions counsellors are available. The clinic also offers life skills counselling, housing referrals and legal assistance. Self-referrals and walk-ins are accepted, as well as referrals from doctors, detox centres, law enforcement, and acute care.

Sources and Text:

Centre for Addiction and Mental Health www.camh.net
Health Canada www.hc-sc.gc.ca

St. Paul's Hospital is an acute care, teaching and research hospital located in downtown Vancouver. It is home to many world-class medical and surgical programs, including heart and lung services, HIV/AIDS and kidney care.

St. Paul's serves both the local community and patients from across BC and the Yukon. St. Paul's is one of 14 health care facilities in Vancouver operated by Providence Health Care, one of Canada's largest faith-based health care organizations. Providence's 1,000 physicians and 6,000 staff deliver compassionate care to patients and residents in British Columbia while training medical professionals and making innovative advances in research.

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