

Let's talk about...

Addictions

MENTAL ILLNESS DEMYSTIFIED

IF YOU ASK SOMEONE WHAT AN ADDICTION IS, HE OR SHE WILL PROBABLY SAY IT'S BEING UNABLE TO CONTROL OR STOP USING DRUGS OR ALCOHOL. HOWEVER, PEOPLE CAN ALSO BECOME ADDICTED TO CERTAIN ACTIVITIES SUCH AS GAMBLING OR SURFING THE INTERNET. SMOKING IS OFTEN OVERLOOKED AS AN ADDICTION, AS IS THE USE OF PAINKILLERS. NO ONE DELIBERATELY SETS OUT TO BECOME ADDICTED TO A SUBSTANCE OR AN ACTIVITY; MOST ADDICTIONS DEVELOP OVER A PERIOD OF TIME AND BECOME PROGRESSIVELY WORSE. ADDICTIONS, NO MATTER WHAT THE TYPE, CROSS ALL SOCIAL AND FINANCIAL BARRIERS AND AFFECT PEOPLE FROM AS YOUNG AS 10 OR 12 TO THOSE IN RETIREMENT.

Addiction is a complex problem that affects an individual's physical and mental health, as well as their family members, friends and their work or school. We often hear people say that they are addicted to eating chocolate or perhaps watching reality TV. However, in a true addiction, a person becomes dependent upon a particular kind of stimulation (e.g. drugs, sex, gambling, etc.) to the point where obtaining a steady supply of that stimulation becomes the person's main focus.

People may come to rely on the effects of the substance or activity to bring short-term relief from difficult or painful feelings, and to make problems seem less important. When people use substances or activities to escape or change the way they feel, using can become a habit which can be hard to break.

Common addictions include:

- Alcohol
- Caffeine
- Food
- Shopping
- Internet
- Drugs
- Nicotine
- Gambling
- Sex

DIAGNOSING AN ADDICTION

In order to diagnose an addiction, experts will look at three key criteria – the three “C’s” of addiction:

- Is there a loss of control (in the areas of amount, timing, consequences)?

- Is there continued and recurrent use/continuing the activity, despite negative consequences?
- Is there compulsive use, or preoccupation with using the substance or doing the activity?

The bottom line with any compulsive habit is: *Is it causing a problem?* If so, then the problem needs to be addressed and the person should seek professional help. It may be the person has not yet developed an obvious addiction, but he or she is headed for trouble. If you are concerned about someone then you need to educate yourself on how to provide help and support. It is critical that your actions, although well-intentioned, do not inadvertently enable the person to continue their compulsive habit.

TREATMENT

Fortunately, addictions are treatable. While the course of treatment may vary depending on the particular addiction, to successfully arrest an addiction, a total multi-disciplinary treatment approach is generally recommended. Typically the treatment care continuum includes:

- **An intervention.** An event or circumstance that causes the person to ‘hit bottom’ and agree to seek help. This could include a structured ‘discussion’ with the family or workplace, hospitalization, or a legal difficulty.
- **An assessment.** This includes an examination of the biological, psychological, and social status of the addicted person by an addictions specialist.
- **Primary care.** In the case of a drug or alcohol addiction, this phase could begin with a detoxification period involving supervised withdrawal. It includes either residential treatment or out-patient counselling over a period of weeks.
- **Continuing care.** Ideally this would include a well-planned and supervised aftercare program. In the case of drugs and alcohol, a period of at least 24 months is recommended to protect against relapse. Continuing care might include participating in self-help groups like Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous, and Gambling Anonymous.

Hardly anyone, young or old, ever admits to an addiction voluntarily. It's up to friends and family members to spot signs of trouble before it's too late. If you, or someone you care about, may have some type of addiction or be headed in that direction, then learn what you can about the addiction and seek advice from a professional.

For additional information on specific addictions, please refer to the other *Let's Talk About It* tip sheets in this series.



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