

What is addiction?

Miracles@Home identifies addiction as a medical problem, using the medical model of addiction. We use the word 'addiction' to encapsulate all problem use, abuse and dependence on any substance or behavior. Common substance addictions include illicit drugs, alcohol, inhalants, prescribed and non-prescribed medications. Common behavioral addictions include gambling, food, sex, relationships, gaming, pornography and shopping.

Addictions share some common core qualities:

- Craving prior to using.
- Impaired control over the actual behavior.
- Continuing the act when there are clear negative consequences.
- Inability to stop or remain abstinent.

The medical model describes addiction as an obsession coupled with a compulsion. According to the online *Oxford Dictionary*, an obsession is “an idea or thought that continually preoccupies or intrudes on a person's mind”, while a compulsion is “an irresistible urge to behave in a certain way”. What this means, medically, is that you are continually preoccupied with the thought of using your drug, which then leads to the compulsion to use it, because you have an irresistible urge to behave in a way that you are convinced will relieve the obsession and its accompanying anxiety.

The 2020 American Psychiatric Association (APA) Dictionary states that:

“Addiction is a state of psychological or physical dependence (or both) on the use of alcohol or other drugs. The term is often used as an equivalent term for substance dependence and is sometimes applied to behavioral disorders, such as sexual, Internet and gambling addictions. A chemical substance with significant potential for producing dependence is called an addictive drug.”

The APA Dictionary goes on to define substance dependence as:

“...a cluster of cognitive, behavioral and physiological symptoms indicating continued use of a substance, despite significant substance-related problems. There is a pattern of repeated substance ingestion resulting in tolerance, withdrawal symptoms if use is suspended, and an uncontrollable drive to continue use.”

There is enough evidence today, particularly in the areas of genetics, neurobiology and pharmacology, to prove that addiction is a chronic medical brain disorder. The medical model posits that the illness lies in the mesolimbic dopamine system – the “pleasure pathway” or “reward system”. What this means is that addiction particularly targets the brain's pleasure centre and exaggerates the increase in dopamine, producing increased “feel-good” sensations – for a while.

Repeated and frequent use progressively leads to a loss of dopamine receptors, which then compromises our ability to control the strong urge to use.

We are essentially trying to get back to the pleasure sensations to which we have become accustomed, but our body chemistry keeps adjusting itself to moderate our erratic flooding of chemicals. We cause damage to the system of homeostasis, our system of stability and balance within the body.

Addiction is a chronic disease, just like other chronic diseases, such as diabetes, hypertension, Parkinson's disease or cancer. Addiction, like chronic diseases, has signs and symptoms, diagnostic tests, progresses in severity, is treatable, has an environmental component, involves pain and suffering, can be life-threatening, may need medication, has a genetic vulnerability, impacts families and is chronic in nature, which means that while it is not curable, it is possible to experience a lifetime's remission from it with treatment.

For the sceptics and those of you who are still thinking about managing your addiction without some sort of help or treatment, the American Society of Addiction Medicine released a public policy document defining addiction as:

"...a treatable, chronic medical disease involving complex interactions among brain circuits, genetics, the environment and an individual's life experiences. People with addiction use substances or engage in behaviors that become compulsive and often continue, despite harmful consequences. Prevention efforts and treatment approaches for addiction are generally as successful as those for other chronic diseases."

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What causes addiction?

Nobody knows for sure why one person becomes an addict and another does not. Genes, personality type, exposure to trauma, sensitivity to stress and/or the need for control, are among the many possibilities that could have contributed to your vulnerability to addiction. Basically, what makes you an addict is that you have the disease of addiction. This is the same response as the one given to the question: "What makes a person an asthmatic?" Answer: "The fact that they have asthma."

We have also found that the disease of addiction can show up in us when we are not using and can appear as a compulsive behavior in other areas of our lives. Addicts can feel irritable, restless and discontented even when they are not using. This leads to physical, mental, emotional and spiritual decline in recovery, if you do not have some sort of treatment. As for anybody with a chronic illness, addiction must be treated, even when you're not using. Just like people with a chronic physical or mental illness must continue treatment to maintain wellness, so too the addict.

There has been enough scientific evidence and research in the area of addiction over the past 30 years to prove even to hard-core deniers that this illness requires a specific kind of treatment.

Addiction is a progressive illness, with increased tolerance levels to substances/behaviors and is often accompanied eventually by feelings, thoughts and behaviors of avoiding pain and suffering, rather than seeking pleasure.

Addiction progresses from pleasure-seeking behavior to pain-avoiding behavior due to changes in brain function.

So how do we treat addiction? Unlike other chronic diseases, there is no specific pill or medication that treats the illness. Pharmacology is used to treat some of the symptoms and also some of the co-occurring illnesses that appear with addiction, such as depression and anxiety.

When we are ill, we “self-medicate” with our addiction, so treatment must come from a different source. An addicted person’s brain has been conditioned to use only their drug. Unlearning this behavior must come with the aid of a structured individual program of disciplines that embrace alternative behaviors and thoughts. These will replace the addictive thoughts and behaviors.

The first step is awareness of the manifestations (ie symptoms) of the disease in you. Here are some manifestations that may indicate that you are suffering from the disease of addiction today:

- You are using or thinking about using today
- You are obsessing about someone or something today
- You have given untrue reasons for your behavior
- You have blamed someone or something for your behavior today
- You are looking for an easier way to stay abstinent than what is being offered
- You are afraid for no good reason today
- You are avoiding something you should do today
- You feel restless, irritable or discontent today
- You have behaved selfishly, dishonestly, fearfully or resentfully today
- You have been over-sensitive, taking things too personally today.

The next step is understanding how to treat the disease on a daily basis. Here is a checklist of some of the indications that you are treating your illness today:

- You are clean and/or sober today
- You have talked to someone about your recovery today
- You have been kind today
- You have bathed, eaten, rested, been active and taken care of basic needs
- You have read recovery literature or watched/listened to recovery media
- You have been Honest, Open-minded and Willing today (known as the HOW of the program)
- You are feeling content and peaceful today.

Recommended videos

What is Addiction?

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C6l3CHhBGeQ> (3:29 mins)

The Reward Circuit: How the Brain Responds to Natural Rewards and Drugs.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=4&v=DMcmrP-BWGk&feature=emb_logo (1:48 mins)

The Swiss Cheese Model of Drug Addiction.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O530Jr1gTlo> (2:02 mins)

TED Talk: Recover Out Loud | Tara Conner.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iAO5cBDvLlc> (9:51 mins)

TED Talk: Why It's Time to Shed the Stigma of Addiction | Marty Boldin.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xzf2XvuBX6U> (16:22 mins)

TED Talk: Addiction is a Chronic Disease.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3OD4ifmC3M4> (13:38 mins)

Reflective Questions: What is addiction?

1. Do you believe addiction is a disease? Or do you believe it is a lack of willpower or resolve? Explain your answer.

2. Do you think you have a problem with addiction, or are you identifying a **potential** problem for now? Explain your answer.

- a) Either way, briefly describe how it is affecting your life and the lives of the people who are important to you.

3. Do you feel as if you are physically withdrawing from your drug today? If so, describe how this feels.

4. Are you craving your drug today? If so, describe how this feels.

5. Have you experienced the phenomenon where your drug no longer works the way it used to? Describe how this feels for you.

6. Do you believe you can “get over” the disease of addiction on your own?
Yes _____ No _____

7. Do you subscribe to the theory that we cannot do this alone? If so, why? If not, why not?

8. Check on yourself to see whether, or how badly, you are suffering from the disease today by answering questions 8a) to 8j).

a) Am I using or thinking about using today?

Yes _____ No _____ A little _____

b) Am I obsessing about someone or something today? If not today, then is there someone or something I obsess about often? Who or what am I obsessing about? Why?

c) Have I given untrue reasons for my behavior? If so, explain:

d) Have I blamed someone or something for my behavior today? Why?

e) Am I looking for an easier way to stay abstinent than what is being offered today? If so, what have you found? Does it work?

f) Am I afraid for no good reason today? If yes, explain:

g) What am I avoiding today that I should do?

h) How have I felt restless, irritable or discontent today?

i) How have I behaved selfishly, dishonestly, fearfully or resentfully today?

j) Have I been over-sensitive, taking things too personally today?

Yes _____ No _____ A little _____

Describe.

9. Check on yourself to see whether, or how well, you are **treating** the disease today by answering question 9a) to 9j).

a) Am I clean and/or sober today?

Yes _____ No _____

b) Who have I talked to about my recovery today? How did it feel?

c) How have I been kind today?

d) Have I bathed, eaten, rested, been active and taken care of basic needs today?

Yes _____

No _____

Some of the above

e) What recovery literature have I read, or recovery media have I watched/listened to today?

f) How have I been Honest, Open-minded and Willing today (known as the HOW of the program)?

g) How content or peaceful am I today, on a scale of 1-10 (1 being not content at all and 10 being the most content I've ever felt)? Give reasons for the number you choose.