



Preserving Kinship Connections

Substance Abuse



Texas Department of
Family and Protective Services
Child Protective Services



What is Addiction?

Addiction is a chronic illness that is difficult to control. It is defined by seeking and using drugs and alcohol, even when that use causes harm to the user or people they care for.

According to the National Survey on Drug Use and Health, 46.3 million Americans, (16.5% of people in the US), have a substance abuse problem. This includes 29.5 million people who were abusing alcohol, and 24 million people who were addicted to drugs.





What is Substance Abuse?

Most people who become addicted decided to try drugs, but did not choose to become addicted.

Using drugs and alcohol over a long time can cause changes in the brain. These changes make it harder for an addicted person to have self control, and resist alcohol and drugs.





What leads to Substance Abuse?

Many people who abuse drugs or alcohol are also living with depression, anxiety, bipolar, and other mood disorders. Often these folks use substances to self-medicate, hoping to alleviate sadness, stress and negative feelings that result from mental health struggles.

Situations that *may or may not* lead to unintentional alcohol and drug abuse:

- going to happy hour with friends to relax after work
- drinking to feel less anxious about school
- using stimulant drugs to deal with sadness after the death of a loved one
- using alcohol or sleeping pills to stop their mind from racing
- trying not to feel the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)
- smoking marijuana to help with symptoms of an eating disorder
- accidentally becoming addicted to medication prescribed by a doctor
- growing up with family members who used drugs or alcohol to relax, relieve stress, or who are addicted



Prevalence of Self-Medication

Prevalence of self-medication with drugs or alcohol for mood disorders

Mood disorder	Self-medication with alcohol only (%)	Self-medication with drugs (with or without alcohol) (%)	Any self-medication	Author	Sample
Dysthymia	12.1	10.8	22.9	Bolton et al., 2009	NESARC 1 (2001/2)
Major depressive disorder	15.4	7.8	23.2	Bolton et al., 2009	NESARC 1 (2001/2)
Bipolar 1 disorder	22.1	18.9	41.0	Bolton et al., 2009	NESARC 1 (2001/2)
Bipolar 2 disorder	23.9	10.8	34.7	Bolton et al., 2009	NESARC 1 (2001/2)
Any mood disorder	15.7	8.4	24.1	Bolton et al., 2009	NESARC 1 (2001/2)



Risk Factors

No one can truly know ahead of time whether a particular person will become addicted to drugs or alcohol. Many Americans come home from work every day and have an alcoholic drink or use cannabis without ever increasing their use or becoming addicted.

You may remember that addiction means the person continues to use drugs or alcohol even when it's made their life harder. We do not know exactly why some people can use regularly without being addicted. We do know that many different factors influence a person's risk for addiction.





Risk Factors

The more risk factors a person has, the more likely using alcohol and drugs will lead to addiction.

Some related factors:

- **Genetics:** Our DNA accounts for about half of a person's risk for addiction. Mental health may also influence risks for drug use and addiction.
- **Environment:** Things the child sees and experiences while growing up can affect whether they become addicted. This can include witnessing or being a victim of abuse or neglect, seeing drug use in the home or neighborhood, peer pressure, and stress.
- **Development:** The earlier drug use begins and the longer it goes on, the more likely the person will become addicted. Teenagers are more likely than younger children to want to try new experiences and make their own decisions. Research has shown that our brains do not fully mature until we are in our mid 20's. Because decision-making, judgment, and self-control are still developing, teens may be more likely to take risks, including trying drugs and alcohol.

How Substance Abuse Affects the Brain

We often think of substance use as making people happy or silly, helping users to either relax, have increased energy, or just have a good time.

Many drugs behave like chemical messengers in the brain, called neurotransmitters. When taking drugs, these chemicals are temporarily increased, which can help the user feel less stress. For a short time they may feel excited, happier and like they can focus better.





How Substance Abuse Affects the Brain

Using for a long time also causes changes in other brain processes, including:

- Learning
- Judgment
- Decision-making
- Memory
- Behavior
- Ability to manage stress
- Reduced empathy
- Understanding the needs of others





How Substance Abuse Affects the Brain

Many people believe that continuing to use drugs even after it's clear they are causing harm is a sign the person is weak or has poor character. That is not accurate – addiction is a disease that changes the chemistry and structure of people's bodies and brains. These changes make it harder for people to stay clean even when they want to.

Drugs behave like the neurotransmitters (messenger chemicals) of the brain's reward system. In the beginning, using alcohol or drugs makes the person feel like they can control their own happiness, or they do not have so many worries. However, using drugs can affect the brain's ability to feel happy and in control more powerfully than people expect. Once they become addicted they may no longer be able to feel a normal level of pleasure or joy without using drugs or alcohol.

The longer someone uses, their body produces less of these messenger chemicals. Because of this, users need greater amounts of the drug and they need to take it more often just to feel "normal." If they want to feel "high," they need even more, which leads to more and more use over time.



How Substance Abuse Affects the Brain

People who are addicted but not yet ready to make changes often do not recognize how their substance abuse harmed other people. Refusing to accept the harm their substance abuse caused can be a sign they are addicted.

Like other long illnesses recovery is a process and takes time. The decision to get clean is only the first step in that process. While the brain is getting used to normal chemical levels, the person can feel extremely sad, hopeless and in physical pain. Their brain has been trained to expect a sudden flood of chemicals that comes with taking drugs or alcohol and helps them feel better. The brain has to learn again how to feel ok without that sudden rush, but this can take a very long time, especially if they were very young when they started using or have been using a long time.

It's common to relapse several times on the way to recovery. After a relapse, the person must then renew their commitment and start the entire painful recovery process again.



Warning Signs to Look For

Common warning signs that may be signs of substance abuse:

- Hiding their substance use
- Abuse or neglect of children in the home
- Withdrawing from friends or loved ones
- Suddenly having money problems, or expensive items disappearing
- Drug paraphernalia
- Increased tolerance to the drug
- Spending long periods of time in the bathroom
- Dilated or pinpointed pupils in their eyes
- Needle marks
- Lying





Warning Signs to Look For

- Using substances even when it creates obvious harm, such as while driving or babysitting, or when the person has certain health conditions
- Legal trouble, such as drug and alcohol-related arrests
- Using a prescription in a way that was not intended or directed
- New or worsening problems at school, work, or home
- Sudden personality and life changes that seem unlike their normal decisions or behavior
- Changes in self-care, hygiene habits, and physical appearance
- Sleeping too much or not enough, insomnia
- New or worsening mental health disorders
- Problems with balance, coordination, or cognitive function
- Sudden extreme mood swings
- Anxiety or paranoia

Why is This Discussion Important?

It is estimated that more than eight million children younger than 18 live with at least one adult who has a substance abuse disorder. That is more than one in 10 children.

Parents can absolutely love their children and still cause harm through abuse or neglect when the substance, rather than meeting the needs of their children, becomes their first priority.





Why is This Discussion Important?

Keep in mind, parents who are addicted to drugs or alcohol may have impaired thought processes. Caregivers should always remember their responsibility put the child's needs first, even if doing so makes the parent sad or angry.

The parents' time with the child should help nurture the child and help them grow up healthy and happy. The parent should not share or expose the child to substance abuse or other adult problems.

Adults who experienced abuse as children may turn to drugs and alcohol as a coping strategy for their own childhood trauma. Providing the child in your care nurturing, structure and patience can help them develop life skills that will allow them to move forward from hard situations in the future.

Effects of Substance Abuse on Children

Children who are exposed to parents using drugs often experience emotional and developmental delays and have behavioral and learning problems in school. If they were exposed to drugs while their mother was pregnant with them, there may be structural changes in their brains and bodies that they can never fully recover from.

These children are more likely to suffer from depression and low self esteem, and to repeat their parent's pattern of substance abuse.





Effects of Substance Abuse on Children

The effects of drug exposure at a young age can create trauma that the child must work through their entire lives.

When drugs or alcohol become their priority, parents focus less on parenting and are less likely to make sure their children's needs are met.

Research shows that children whose parents are using are three to four times more likely to experience neglect, and physical, emotional and sexual abuse.





Effects of Substance Abuse on Children

In some cases, parents are the perpetrators of abuse/neglect. In others, they fail to react or protect the child.

Other possible harms caused by parental substance abuse:

- Fetal alcohol syndrome
- Malnutrition
- Delayed developmental milestones
- Poor attachment to caregivers
- Childhood injuries
- Exposure to crime
- Experimenting with drugs or alcohol at a younger age
- More likely to become addicted themselves

Understanding Recovery

Parents who choose recovery on their own may be more motivated to make changes sooner, while parents who have been court ordered to work with CPS may not have accepted that they need help. They may also be anywhere within the long process of recovery.

Parents may be in denial that they have a problem, may be in the very early stages of recovery, or may already understand what led to their addiction, what their triggers are, and how to take responsibility for the harm they caused.





Understanding Recovery

Parents who attend treatment or work toward recovery because it was court ordered can still learn from the process and make progress, although it may take longer.

Relapse is often part of recovery. If a parent relapses, they may not be able to be around their child without causing further harm for a while. However, some parents continue to have appropriate interactions with their child, and this should be decided on a case-by-case basis.

Recovery takes time and if you see the parent taking two steps forward and one step back, do not assume that means there has been no progress or they are not trying. This is common as the parent begins to understand what it means to get and stay clean.



Tips for Kinship Caregivers

- Age-appropriate discussions about substance abuse may help the child understand what is happening in their family. Speak positively and do not blame or judge the parent.
- Young children should not be expected to understand and/or follow their parents' recovery progress. Ensuring the child's stability and emotional well being should be the kinship caregiver's goal.
- Consider allowing older children and teens to participate in [Al-Anon](#) or [Al-Ateen](#), which were created to support family members of people who abuse alcohol or drugs.
- Allow the child to talk about their worries and anger without saying anything about what is right or wrong. Allow them to have their feelings about their parents' actions. Be willing to just listen.
- Ensure the child has a counselor or other trusted adult who they feel safe discussing their feelings with.
- Show empathy for the parents' struggles but ensure that the child's needs for stability and safety are your priority.



Visitation Tips for Kinship Caregivers

- Set clear boundaries for behavior during visits.
- If the parent shows up to an approved visit or phone call and it seems or intoxicated or there is something wrong, contact the child's caseworker immediately; do not wait until the visit is over.
- If the parent appears to present a danger to the child, themselves, or anyone else nearby, end the visit immediately; ensure the child and everyone in your group is safe, and then contact the child's caseworker.
- Understand that if it's safe for the child to be with their parent, children often miss their parents and benefit from visits because it helps them know that everyone is safe.
- Ensure you follow the rules set by the courts and CPS around visitation, as these rules are set up to ensure the child's safety and well being.



Thank You



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