

# Substance Use Disorders

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# WHAT ARE DRUGS?

A drug is a substance that changes the way your mind and body work.

Psychoactive drugs can influence the way you see things, your mood, thinking, memory or behaviour. Drugs may be divided into four groups:

- Depressants • slow down the brain, e.g. alcohol, heroin
- Stimulants • speed up the brain, e.g. caffeine, nicotine, amphetamines
- Hallucinogens • produce hallucinations, change thought processes or disrupt the way one sees time and space, e.g. LSD
- Others • have properties of more than one of the above e.g., cannabis and ecstasy

Drugs play a common part of everyday life, with most people using drugs in some form. We may use drugs on awakening (caffeine), throughout the day (cigarettes), as a way to relax (alcohol) and reduce pain (aspirin). Used in moderation some can have positive effects. However, even though the use of drugs is common, usage can have serious negative consequences.

Problems resulting from drug include:

## 1. Intoxication

Drug intoxication refers to the physiological effects of drugs on the brain that cause behavioural and/or psychological changes. These may develop during or shortly after drug use. Such problems include short-term effects of drugs such as impaired judgment, and also repercussions of drug use such as drink driving.

## **2. Drug Abuse**

Use becomes abuse when a person continues to use a drug despite harmful, negative effects that cause distress or interfere with daily life. These negative effects may be related to various legal (e.g., theft), social (e.g., aggressive behaviour when drunk), or interpersonal (e.g., family disruption) problems. Drugs may also impact on the person physically and may cause difficulties fulfilling major role obligations.

## **3. Drug Dependence**

When a person becomes dependent upon a drug, its usage becomes central to thoughts, emotions and activities. They feel a desire for the drug and spend much time getting and using the drug as well as recovering from its effects. Tolerance may develop, which means that the same amount of the drug causes smaller effects. This often leads the person taking larger amounts of the drug to achieve the same effect.

A person who is dependent continues to use drugs despite realising that it causes problems. However, stopping may be very difficult because craving for the drug and withdrawal.

Withdrawal symptoms may develop when a person who has been using a drug heavily for a long time tries to cut down. The symptoms depend on the drug, but may include anxiety, sweating, tremors, nausea, moodiness, vomiting, fits, irritability, sleep disturbances, depression, fatigue, craving and cramps. These symptoms often cause distress or impairment in social, occupational or important areas of functioning.

### **Other Problems With Drug Usage**

A person may experience other symptoms that result from their drug use. These may include mood, psychotic, sleep or anxiety problems, delirium, dementia, or sexual dysfunction.

## Do You Have a Problem?

When someone has a drug-related problem, their desire for the drug is very strong. It is not only the amount of the drug the person takes, but the reasons why they take it and whether it causes problems. Often those with drug-related problems express health, social, legal, and financial concerns. They may have attention, concentration and memory problems, difficulties learning, a lower educational achievement, a reduced sex drive, disrupted sperm production or ovulation, an increased risk of respiratory disease and cancer. Many also express concerns about their relationships, lack of motivation and energy, as well as worries related to their inability to work, legal concerns, feeling addicted, not in control, anxious, and paranoid. There is the risk of serious long-term effects when someone uses a drug to handle a difficult life situation.

## Why do people have drug problems?

There appears to be a number of factors which contribute to the development and maintenance of drug related problems. This has made the task of providing a theory to explain the core elements quite a challenge.

The three most influential factors include sociocultural, psychological and physiological.

### 1. Social and Cultural Factors

Our environment shapes what we do and how we view the world. It also influences if we abuse drugs.

The influences on drug use include ethnic background, culture, gender, family, occupation, social class, laws, the media and religious affiliation. Some examples are:

- Our **culture** that defines what behaviour is acceptable and not. Differences in cultural attitudes affect drug use.

- **Occupation** influences drug-related behaviour. For example, alcohol and tobacco use is more prevalent in certain occupations, such as people in the drink trade.
- The **legal system** sets the boundaries for who can buy certain drugs and restricts the use of some drugs altogether by making them illegal.
- **Parents** provide children with a model of what they consider to be acceptable drug use that in turn affects what children consider acceptable.

## 2. Psychological Factors

Psychological factors include experiences with drugs, personality factors, and influences from those around us.

- \* Drug use may lead to positive effects (e.g. approval, euphoria) and the avoidance of negative ones (e.g. reduced tension). From such experiences people learn to expect that drugs can solve their problems.
- \* Some people have characteristics that make them more likely to use drugs. For example, individuals who feel they have poor social skills are more likely to use drugs. Similarly, people who lack alternative coping skills when faced with negative emotions may also be more prone to substance use.
- \* Those around us. Parents and peers together give individuals expectancies and beliefs regarding drug use. Consistent with this, people who drink alcohol regularly are likely to have someone close to them who drinks.
- \* Problem drug use can also be triggered by a stressful life experience, or painful, unpleasant event.

### **3. Physiological Factors**

Physiological factors contribute to the continued use of drugs. Once dependence develops, unless a person continues to use withdrawal will occur, so in order not to experience the adverse effects of withdrawal, the withdrawal symptoms become a trigger for more use.

## **Guiding treatment**

Given the available evidence suggests that many factors contribute to the development and maintenance of drug use problems, treatments target these important aspects.

### **1. Sociocultural**

The sociocultural influences that affect drug usage are treated by increasing the individual's awareness of the pressures our society and culture exert. For example, this may involve making the individual aware of how their peers or the media affect their drug use. Additionally, given that many of the factors that act to initiate and maintain drug use are related to the family and those around us, it is important to involve such individuals in the treatment process.

### **2. Psychological**

Cognitive Behaviour Therapy involves treatments that change behaviour and those that change thoughts (or cognitions) that lead to drug use.

A person records feelings and thoughts to help identify when and why they use drugs. This information may then be used to address drug-related beliefs and thoughts that contribute to continued use, urges, and craving.

Cognitive Behaviour Therapy also addresses events that trigger drug use. It is important to learn how to recognise the triggers of drug use

and how to apply alternative coping skills. A person may recognise that drug usage is linked to stress. Therefore, ways for coping with life's stressors (e.g., stress management) could be taught. Similarly, people with substance use problems may have difficulties relating to others. This may arise because of the individual's false belief that drugs make them more appealing, acceptable, and able to handle social situations. Hence, treatment can involve social skills and assertiveness training. Such skills reduce the need for drug use due to a greater sense of mastery and control. The person can use the skills in daily living, so that gains translate to everyday settings.

***Exposure interventions*** Exposure involves facing situations in which a person would normally feel the need for drugs. The aim is to help the person confront and address unhelpful beliefs about the ability of drugs to impact positively on their life.

Another aspect of Cognitive Behaviour Therapy for drug related problems is aversion therapy. This has been used to reduce or eliminate the craving or desire for drugs. The idea is to make drug use unpleasant. For smoking the use of a rapid smoking treatment may be used. This is where a smoker sits in a poorly ventilated room and puffs much faster than normal, causing great discomfort.

***Relapse prevention*** It is important to increase awareness of the potential for relapse. Modern therapy realises that treatment gains need to be maintained in the long-term and relapse prevention programs aim to do this.

### **3. Physiological**

Prescription medications may also be used to assist in treating some drug-related problems. Medications enhance the treatment process, as well as deal with cravings or symptoms of withdrawal. However, the effectiveness of the various medications depends not only on the problem, but also the type of drug being used.

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