Alcohol and Drug Use
When Is It Abuse? When Is It Addiction?

When alcohol and/or drug use interferes with normal living activities, it is called alcohol and/or drug abuse. Problems can be with family and friends, one's job, health issues, legal issues, financial and emotional problems. Mood swings are not uncommon. Depression may even develop and persist.

When abuse continues even with bad consequences, the substance abuse may have progressed to addiction. Addiction to alcohol is usually referred to as alcoholism. Addiction to other substances is often referred to as drug addiction. Chemical dependency also describes the condition where a person cannot control their alcohol and/or drug use.

CAUSES

- The cause of alcoholism and drug addiction (*chemical dependency*) is unknown.
- Research has found that having an alcoholic family member makes it more likely to have another family member become an alcoholic as well.
- A person's risk for developing alcoholism or drug addiction can increase based on the person's environment. This includes:
  - Where and how he or she lives.
  - Family, friends, and culture.
  - Peer pressure.
  - How easy it is to get alcohol and drugs.

SYMPTOMS

- A strong need or instinct to drink and/or use drugs (*cravings*).
- Not able to limit drinking and/or drug-taking on any given occasion (*loss of control*).
- Withdrawal symptoms such as nausea, sweating, shakiness and anxiety occur when alcohol and/or drug use is stopped after a period of heavy drinking and/or using (*physical dependence*).
- The need to drink greater amounts of alcohol or take greater amounts of drugs in order to “get high” (*tolerance*).

DIAGNOSIS

The diagnosis is best made by a physician who specializes in addiction medicine or a licensed drug and alcohol specialist. However, it is possible to get an idea if you have a problem by answering the questions below.

- Have you been told by friends or family that drugs/alcohol has become a problem?
- Do you get into fights when drinking or using drugs?
- Do you not remember what you do while using (*blackouts*)?
- Do you lie about use or amounts of drugs or alcohol you consume?
- Do you need chemicals to get you going?
- Do you suffer in work performance or school because of drug or alcohol use?
- Do you get sick from use of drugs or alcohol, but keep using anyway?
- Do you need drugs or alcohol to relate to people or feel comfortable in social situations?
- Do you use drugs or alcohol to forget problems?

If you answered yes to any of the above questions, you show signs of chemical dependency. Professional evaluation is suggested. The longer you use drugs and alcohol, the greater the problems will become.

TREATMENT

Alcoholism/addiction has little to do with willpower. Alcoholics and addicts have an uncontrollable need for alcohol and/or drugs that overrides their ability to stop drinking or using. This need can be as strong as the need for food or water. Although some people are able to recover from alcoholism/addiction without help, most alcoholics and addicts need help. With treatment and support, many people are able to stop drinking and using drugs. Long term recovery is possible.

Addiction cannot be cured but it can be treated successfully. Most hospitals and clinics can refer you to a specialized care center.

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