

## ADDICTION

# Overcoming Drug Addiction

Ready to deal with your drug abuse problem? This step-by-step guide can help you cope with cravings, deal with relapse, and overcome your substance use disorder.

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## The first step to overcoming drug abuse and addiction

Developing an addiction to drugs isn't a character flaw or a sign of weakness, and it takes more than willpower to overcome the problem. Abusing illegal or certain prescription drugs can create changes in the brain, causing powerful cravings and a compulsion to use that makes sobriety seem like an impossible goal. But recovery is never out of reach, no matter how hopeless your situation seems or how many times you've tried and failed before. With the right treatment and support, change is always possible.

For many people struggling with addiction, the toughest step toward recovery is the very first one: recognizing that you have a problem and deciding to make a change. It's normal to feel uncertain about whether you're ready to start recovery, or if you have what it takes to quit. If you're addicted to a prescription drug, you may be concerned about how you're going to find an alternate way to treat a medical condition. It's okay to feel torn. Committing to sobriety involves changing many things, including:

- ➔ The way you deal with stress.
- ➔ Who you allow in your life.
- ➔ What you do in your free time.
- ➔ How you think about yourself.
- ➔ The prescription and over-the-counter medications you take.

It's also normal to feel conflicted about giving up your drug of choice, even when you know it's causing problems in your life. Recovery requires time, motivation, and support, but by making a commitment to change, you can overcome your addiction and regain control of your life.

## Think about change

- Keep track of your drug use, including when and how much you use. This will give you a better sense of the role the addiction is playing in your life.
- List the pros and cons of quitting, as well as the costs and benefits of continuing your drug use.
- Consider the things that are important to you, such as your partner, your kids, your pets, your career, or your health. How does your drug use affect those things?
- Ask someone you trust about their feelings on your drug use.
- Ask yourself if there's anything preventing you from changing. What could help you make the change?

## Preparing for change: 5 keys to addiction recovery

01. Remind yourself of the reasons you want to change.
02. Think about your past attempts at recovery, if any. What worked? What didn't?
03. Set specific, measurable goals, such as a start date or limits on your drug use.
04. Remove reminders of your addiction from your home, workplace, and other places you frequent.
05. Tell friends and family that you're committing to recovery, and ask for their support.

## Explore your addiction treatment options

Once you've committed to recovery, it's time to explore your treatment choices. While addiction treatment can vary according to the specific drug, a successful program often includes different elements, such as:

**Detoxification.** Usually the first step is to purge your body of drugs and manage withdrawal symptoms.

**Behavioral counseling.** Individual, group, and/or family [therapy](#) can help you identify the root causes of your drug use, repair your relationships, and learn healthier coping skills.

**Medication** may be used to manage withdrawal symptoms, prevent relapse, or treat any co-occurring mental health condition such as depression or anxiety.

**Long-term follow-up** can help to prevent relapse and maintain sobriety. This may include attending regular in-person support groups or online meetings to help keep your recovery on track.

## Types of drug treatment programs

- **Intensive inpatient treatment.** This is a short-term clinical treatment for people who have developed a physiological dependence on a drug and need help with withdrawal symptoms.
- **Residential treatment.** Residential treatment involves living at a facility and getting away from work, school, family, friends, and addiction triggers while undergoing intensive treatment. Residential treatment usually lasts from 30 days to several months.

- ➔ **Day treatment/Partial hospitalization programs (PHP).** Partial hospitalization is for people who require ongoing medical monitoring but wish to still live at home and have a stable living environment. These treatment programs usually meet at a treatment center for at least 20 hours a week, but you return home at the end of each day.
- ➔ **Intensive outpatient programs (IOP).** Similar to PHPs, IOPs don't require you to live at a treatment center. However, they differ from PHPs in that they only require between 9 and 19 hours of treatment each week, so you can schedule treatments around school and work.
- ➔ **Therapy.** One-on-one or group therapy sessions can be useful in developing coping skills, identifying triggers, and exploring the roots of your addiction.

Remember that everyone's needs are different. For example, not everybody requires medically supervised detox or an extended stint in rehab. Whether you have a problem with illegal or prescription drugs, addiction treatment should be customized to your unique situation. It's also important to find a program that feels right for you. Read [Choosing Drug Rehab and Addiction Treatment](#) to learn more.

## Tips for finding the best drug addiction treatment for you

**Remember that no treatment works for everyone.** Everyone's needs are different. Whether you have a problem with illegal or prescription drugs, addiction treatment should be customized to your unique situation. It's important that you find a program that feels right.

**Treatment should address more than just your drug abuse.** Addiction affects your whole life, including your relationships, career, health, and psychological well-being. Treatment success depends on developing a new way of living and addressing the reasons why you turned to drugs in the first place. For example, your drug dependency may have developed from a desire to manage pain or to cope with stress, in which case you'll need to find a healthier way to relieve pain or to handle stressful situations.

**Commitment and follow-through are key.** Drug addiction treatment is not a quick and easy process. In general, the longer and more intense the drug use, the longer and more intense the treatment you'll need. And in all cases, long-term follow-up care is crucial to recovery.

**There are many places to turn for help.** Not everybody requires medically supervised detox or an extended stint in rehab. The care you need depends on a variety of factors, including your age, drug-use history, medical or psychiatric conditions. In addition to doctors and psychologists, many clergy members, social workers, and counselors offer addiction treatment services.

**Seek treatment for any mental health problems simultaneously.** As you seek help for drug addiction, it's also important to get treatment for any other medical or psychological issues you're experiencing. Your best chance of recovery is by getting [combined mental health and addiction treatment](#) from the same treatment provider or team.

## Find support for your addiction recovery

Don't try to go it alone—reach out for support. Whatever treatment approach you choose, having positive influences and a solid support system is essential. The more people you can turn to for encouragement,

guidance, and a listening ear, the better your chances for recovery.

**Lean on close friends and family.** Having the support of friends and family members is an invaluable asset in recovery. If you're reluctant to turn to your loved ones because you've let them down before, consider going to relationship counseling or family therapy.

**Build a sober social network.** If your previous social life revolved around drugs, you may need to [make some new connections](#). It's important to have sober friends who will support your recovery. Try taking a class, joining a church or a civic group, [volunteering](#), or attending events in your community.

**Consider moving into a sober living home.** Sober living homes provide a safe, supportive place to live while you're recovering from drug addiction. They are a good option if you don't have a stable home or a drug-free living environment.

**Make meetings a priority.** Join a 12-step recovery support group, such as [Narcotics Anonymous \(NA\)](#), and attend meetings regularly. Spending time with people who understand exactly what you're going through can be very healing. You can also benefit from the shared experiences of the group members and learn what others have done to stay sober.

[\[Read: NA and Other Peer Support Groups for Drug Addiction\]](#)

## Learn healthy ways to cope with stress

After addressing your immediate problems with addiction and starting treatment, you'll still have to face the problems that led to your drug abuse. Did you start using to numb painful emotions, calm yourself after an argument, unwind after a bad day, or forget about your problems?

Once you're sober, the negative feelings that you dampened with drugs will resurface. For treatment to be successful, you'll first need to resolve your underlying issues.

Once you have resolved your underlying issues, you will, at times, continue to experience stress, loneliness, frustration, anger, shame, anxiety, and hopelessness. These emotions are all a normal part of life. Finding ways to address these feelings as they arise is an essential component to your treatment and recovery.

There are healthier ways to keep your stress level in check. You can learn to manage your problems without falling back on your addiction. When you're confident in your ability to quickly de-stress, facing strong feelings isn't as intimidating or overwhelming.

## Quickly relieve stress without drugs

Different [quick stress relief strategies](#) work better for some people than others. The key is to find the one that works best for you.

**Movement.** A brisk walk around the block can be enough to relieve stress. Yoga and meditation are also excellent ways to bust stress and find balance.

**Step outside and savor the warm sun and fresh air.** Enjoy a beautiful view or landscape.

**Play with your dog or cat.** Enjoy the relaxing touch of your pet's fur.

**Experiment with your sense of smell.** Breathe in the scent of fresh flowers or coffee beans, or savor a scent that reminds you of a favorite vacation, such as sunscreen or a seashell.

**Close your eyes and picture a peaceful place.** Think of a sandy beach, or a fond memory, such as your child's first steps or time spent with friends.

**Pamper yourself.** Make yourself a steaming cup of tea, give yourself a neck or shoulder massage. Soak in a hot bath or shower.

## Be aware of drug triggers

Your recovery doesn't end at getting sober. Your brain still needs time to recover and rebuild connections that changed while you were addicted. During this rebuild, drug cravings can be intense. You can support your continued recovery by avoiding people, places, and situations that trigger your urge to use:

**Step away from your friends who use.** Don't hang out with friends who are still doing drugs. Surround yourself with people who support your sobriety, not those who tempt you to slip back into old, destructive habits.

**Avoid bars and clubs.** Even if you don't have a problem with alcohol, drinking lowers inhibitions and impairs judgment, which can easily lead to a relapse. Drugs are often readily available and the temptation to use can be overpowering. Also avoid any other environments and situations that you associate with drug use.

**Be upfront about your history of drug use when seeking medical treatment.** If you need a medical or dental procedure done, be upfront and find a provider who will work with you in either prescribing alternatives or the absolute minimum medication necessary. You should never feel ashamed or humiliated about previous drug use or be denied medication for pain; if that happens, find another provider.

**Use caution with prescription drugs.** If you were addicted to a prescription drug, such as an opioid painkiller, you may need to talk to your doctor about finding alternate ways to manage pain. Regardless of the drug you experienced problems with, it's important to stay away from prescription drugs with the potential for abuse or use only when necessary and with extreme caution. Drugs with a high abuse potential include painkillers, sleeping pills, and anti-anxiety medication.

## Cope with drug cravings

Sometimes craving cannot be avoided, and it is necessary to find a way to cope:

**Get involved in a distracting activity.** Read, see friends, go to a movie, immerse yourself in a hobby, hike, or exercise. Once you're interested in something else, you'll find the urges go away.

**Talk it through.** Talk to friends or family members about craving when it occurs. Talking can be very helpful in pinpointing the source of the craving. Also, talking about craving often helps to discharge and relieve the feeling and will help restore honesty in your relationship. Craving is nothing to feel bad about.

**Challenge and change your thoughts.** When experiencing a craving, many people have a tendency to remember only the positive effects of the drug and forget the negative consequences. Therefore, you may find it helpful to remind yourself that you really won't feel better if you use and that you stand to lose a lot. Sometimes it is helpful to have these consequences listed on a small card that you keep with you.

**Urge surf.** Many people try to cope with their urges by toughing it out. But some cravings are too strong to ignore. When this happens, it can be useful to stay with the urge until it passes. This technique is called urge surfing. Imagine yourself as a surfer who will ride the wave of your drug craving, staying on top of it until it crests, breaks, and turns into less powerful, foamy surf. When you ride out the craving, without trying to battle, judge, or ignore it, you'll see that it passes more quickly than you'd think.

### The three basic steps of urge surfing:

- 01. Notice how you're experience the craving.** Sit in a comfortable chair with your feet flat on the floor and your hands in a relaxed position. Take a few deep breaths and focus your attention on your body. Notice where in your body you experience the craving or urge and what the sensations feel like. Verbalize what you're experiencing. For example, you could tell yourself: "My craving is in my mouth and nose and in my stomach."
- 02. Focus on one area where you're experiencing the craving.** What are the sensations in that area? Describe them to yourself. For example, perhaps you feel hot, cold, tingly, or numb? Maybe your muscles are tense? How large an area is involved? Notice if the sensations change as you focus on them. "My mouth feels dry. There is a numbness in my lips. When I swallow, I can imagine the feeling of using."
- 03. Repeat by focusing on each part of your body that experiences the urge.** Describe to yourself how the sensations change, how the urge comes and goes. Many people notice that after a few minutes of urge surfing, their craving has disappeared. The purpose of this exercise, however, is not to make the urge go away but to experience it in a new way. If you regularly practice urge surfing, you'll become more familiar with your cravings and find it easier to ride them out until they go away naturally.

## Build a meaningful drug-free life

You can support your drug treatment and protect yourself from relapse by having activities and interests that provide meaning to your life. It's important to be involved in things that you enjoy, that make you feel needed, and add meaning to your life. When your life is filled with rewarding activities and a sense of purpose, your addiction will lose its appeal.

**Pick up an old hobby or try a new one.** Do things that challenge your creativity and spark your imagination—something you've always wanted to try. Learn a musical instrument, a foreign language, or try a new sport.

**Adopt a pet.** Yes, pets are a responsibility, but caring for an animal makes you feel loved and needed. Pets can also get you out of the house for exercise.

**Spend time in nature.** Take a scenic hike, go fishing or camping, or enjoy regular walks in a park.

**Enjoy the arts.** Visit a museum, go to a concert or a play, take an art class or write a memoir.

**Get involved in your community.** Replace your addiction with drug-free groups and activities. [Volunteer](#), become active in your church or faith community, or join a local club or neighborhood group.

**Set meaningful goals.** Having goals to work toward and something to look forward to can be powerful antidotes to drug addiction. It doesn't matter what the goals are, just that they are important to you.

**Look after your health.** Regular [exercise](#), [adequate sleep](#), and [healthy eating habits](#) help you keep your energy levels up and your stress levels down. The more you can stay healthy and feel good, the easier it will be to stay sober.

## Don't let relapse keep you down

Relapse is a common part of the recovery process from drug addiction. While relapse is frustrating and discouraging, it can be an opportunity to learn from your mistakes, identify additional triggers, and correct your treatment course.

### What causes relapse?

Different “triggers” can put you at risk of relapsing into old patterns of substance use. While specific causes of relapse differ from person to person, some common triggers include:

- ➔ Negative emotional state (such as stress, sadness, anger, or trauma)
- ➔ Positive emotional state (feeling happy and wanting to feel even better, such as having a good time with friends)
- ➔ Physical discomfort (such as pain or withdrawal symptoms)
- ➔ Trying to test your personal control (“I can use just once” or “have just one pill”)
- ➔ Strong temptation or urge (craving to use)
- ➔ Conflict (such as an argument with your spouse or partner)
- ➔ Social pressure (being in a situation where it seems everyone else is using)

The important thing to remember is that relapse doesn't mean drug treatment failure. Don't give up. Call your sponsor, talk to your therapist, go to a meeting, or schedule an appointment with your doctor. When you're sober again and out of danger, look at what triggered the relapse, what went wrong, and what you could have done differently. You can choose to get back on the path to recovery and use the experience to strengthen your commitment.

## Support organizations

Most of these 12-step programs have worldwide chapters:

[Narcotics Anonymous](#)

[Cocaine Anonymous](#)

[Crystal Meth Anonymous](#)

[Marijuana Anonymous](#)

Read: [NA and Other Peer Support Groups for Drug Addiction](#)

## Professional help for drug treatment and recovery

In the U.S.	Use the <a href="#"><u>Substance Abuse Treatment Facility Locator</u></a> , call the <a href="#"><u>SAMHSA helpline</u></a> at 1-800-662-4357, <a href="#"><u>Get One-on-One Help to Address Your Child's Substance Use</u></a> , or call the Partnership for Drug-Free Kids helpline at 1-855-378-4373.
UK	Find <a href="#"><u>NHS drug addictions support services</u></a> or call the <a href="#"><u>Frank helpline</u></a> at 0800 776600.
Canada	<a href="#"><u>Finding Quality Addiction Care</u></a> (Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction)
Australia	Find <a href="#"><u>drug and alcohol services in your State/Territory</u></a> (Department of Health & Aging).

## More Information

### Helpful links



01. [Step by Step Guides to Finding Treatment for Drug Use Disorders](#) - Guides for adults, teens, or those helping someone addicted to drugs. (National Institute on Drug Abuse)
02. [Effective Treatments for Opioid Addiction](#) - Medications used in the treatment of opioid addiction. (National Institute on Drug Abuse)
03. [What is Substance Abuse Treatment? A Booklet for Families](#) - Learn about treatment options and what you can do. (SAMHSA)
04. [Principles of Drug Addiction Treatment](#) - Effective treatment of substance abuse and addiction. (National Institute on Drug Abuse)
05. [How can prescription drug addiction be treated?](#) - Treatment options for prescription drug addiction including addiction to opioid painkillers. (National Institute on Drug Abuse)
06. [Darkness Before Dawn](#) - Collection of writings that offer guidance and perspective on depression from a [HelpGuide affiliate](#). (Sounds True)

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