

# Why Addiction is a Family Disease

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Drug abuse can transform a son or daughter into an untrustworthy stranger, and it can turn a parent into an unpredictable tyrant. Addiction is referred to as a ‘family disease’ because it only takes one member of this unit to become addicted for the whole family to become dysfunctional.

It is common for the rest of the family to feel somehow responsible for the addictive behaviour – “maybe if we had tried harder” or “if only we had seen the signs sooner’. Those who fall into substance abuse can become highly skilled at manipulating the rest of the family by taking advantage of these feelings of guilt – e.g. kids can be made to feel incredibly guilty when a parent tells them, “if only you behaved better, I wouldn’t need to drink so much”.

Addiction tends to isolate families due to shame about what is going on. The family is pushed tighter together due to the need to hide the problem, and there can be a real sense of ‘us and them’. Parents may become willing to lie in order to protect their addicted child, and kids may be afraid to invite friends home in case mum or dad is drunk.

Living with an addict means life can become like an emotional rollercoaster, and the mood of this one person can decide the type of day everyone else is going to have. The scary thing is how fast and unpredictable these mood changes occur – it can be all jokes and laughter one minute, but like a click of a switch the person is shouting and throwing things around. Living in this type of situation can be incredibly stressful, and there can often be physical abuse as well.

## What is Addiction?

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Addiction is not the same as doing something all the time because you like it although the word is often misused in this way – you will hear people say things like “I’m addicted to this new flavour of yogurt’. The addiction we are talking about here is where changes have occurred in a person’s brain that leads to an inability to stop a behaviour even when the person decides to quit.

Addiction involves both physical and psychological dependence. To say people are psychologically addicted means they experience cravings, and they find it hard to imagine how they could cope without the drug. Physical addiction occurs because the body needs to adapt to the substance abuse – it does this by developing tolerance. Once people become physically addicted, it means they are going to experience withdrawal substances when they stop using the substance.

The American Society of Addiction Medicine (ASAM) defines addiction this way:

*“Addiction is a primary, chronic disease of brain reward, motivation, memory and related circuitry. Dysfunction in these circuits leads to characteristic biological, psychological, social and spiritual manifestations. This is reflected in an individual pathologically pursuing reward and/or relief by substance use and other behaviours”*

It is not necessary for people to become physically addicted before a mind-altering substance starts to cause serious problems in their life. Problem drinkers can behave in much the same way as alcoholics, and a first-time drug user could become psychotic or overdose.

## **Signs of Teenage Drug or Alcohol Abuse**

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Mothers and fathers can miss the signs of alcohol or drug abuse for a long time, and it doesn't mean they are bad parents. Teenagers can quickly become skilled at hiding the effects of substance use, and it is easy to blame changes in their behaviour on the normal ups and downs of adolescence. This is why it is so important for parents to be looking for out for signs of drug abuse, and to act on any intuition they might have that something is wrong with their child.

It is vital to deal with any suspicion of substance abuse quickly because the longer a child is allowed to use alcohol or drugs, the more likelihood of them becoming addicted. Drugs like methamphetamine and heroin can lead to addiction rapidly because the effects of these chemicals are so pleasurable. Common signs of alcohol or drug abuse would include:

- alcohol, drugs, money, or valuables are going missing from the home
- illness in the morning with no apparent cause
- changes in sleeping habits
- reduced interest in food
- mood swings
- bloodshot eyes or pupils that look abnormal
- slurred speech
- physical tremors
- unexplained weight loss
- deterioration of performance at school
- apparent loss in motivation
- strange smells on clothing
- secretive behaviour
- loss of interest in hobbies
- sudden change in personality
- unexplained nosebleeds
- needle marks
- rashes around the nose or mouth

- seizure with no previous history of seizures
- increased clumsiness
- loss of interest in personal hygiene/grooming
- problems with the police
- unexplained injuries
- increased rebelliousness against family rules

These symptoms can occur due to reasons other than substance abuse, but it is important to rule this out as a potential cause.

## **Why Do Kids Become Addicted?**

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The one question most parents are desperate to know is – why? Did they do something wrong? How could they have prevented it from happening? Nobody ever really sets out with the intention of becoming addicted to alcohol or drugs, and it is scary how easy a trap this is for kids to fall into.

Adults can forget just how powerful peer pressure can be during those teenage years, but saying ‘no’ to something that the ‘cool’ kids are doing isn’t easy. Adolescents can feel desperate to fit in with their friends, and refusing to join in can mean being ostracised by the group. Sometimes it is just easier to go along with everyone else, and this means even a sensible teenager can end up in the clutches of addiction.

In some cases, teenagers can be experiencing the early mild symptoms of a mental health problem like bipolar disorder or anxiety disorder. They use alcohol or drugs, and it makes them feel better. The young person ends up addicted because they are self-medicating this condition – even though this person may not be consciously aware that this is what is happening. There can be lots of other reasons for why young people feel unable to cope in life and substance abuse can seem to offer an easy solution.

It is also believed that some teenagers are particularly prone to falling into addiction due to their genes or personality. Those young people who grow up in a home where the people around them engage in substance abuse can just assume this behaviour is normal.

## **What to do if You Suspect Your Child is Abusing Drugs**

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If your child is abusing alcohol or drugs, it means they are in serious danger. Young people can suffer more serious consequences due to addiction than adults because their brain is still developing – their bodies are also less well able to handle these chemicals than adults. If you suspect your child of engaging in substance abuse you need to take action fast.

The first thing to do is to confront your child with your suspicions. Don’t lose your temper, or become hysterical, as this will just put this young person on the defensive. You need to calmly explain why you suspect drug abuse, and the action you are going to take if the behaviour continues. Listen to any explanation your child offers, but don’t accept

these answers too readily and expect some denial – those who are caught up in addiction soon learn to be deceitful and manipulative. Try to find out why they are abusing alcohol or drugs without looking for someone to blame – let the child explain using his or her own words.

In some cases, the ‘softly-softly’ approach will be enough to get your child to admit to the problem and agree to get help. If this doesn’t work, you are going to need to give an ultimatum. This means outlining the penalties for continuance with the behaviour. You should only give an ultimatum if you are prepared to follow it through. Your family can also stage an intervention in order to pressurise your child into entering rehab. Don’t believe the myth that a person has to be willing to enter rehab in order for it to be effective – there are plenty of stories of young people who went to rehab reluctantly but had a change of heart while they were there.

It is vital you understand what you are dealing with if your child had become addicted to alcohol or drugs. It is no good expecting this young person to just use willpower to end the behaviour. They are likely to need professional help, and in a lot of cases, the best option is going to be an inpatient rehab programme. If your child is dealing with a dual diagnosis (a mental health problem like depression alongside the addiction), you will need specialised help for this.

## **Things to Avoid When Dealing with Teenage Substance Abuse**

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- trying to minimise the behaviour – e.g. saying it is just part of growing up
- covering up for or enabling the substance abuse – e.g. telling lies to keep your loved one out of trouble
- losing your temper
- making it all about you – “you have hurt me so much”
- getting physically aggressive
- refusing to consider treatment for teenagers because you believe they are ‘too young’ to be addicted
- giving ultimatums that you are not prepared to follow-up on – this just reduces your credibility
- arguing with your child when he/she is high
- allow your child to use your love as tool of manipulation
- drinking alcohol or using drugs alongside your child

## **How to Cope with an Addicted Parent**

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If one or both of your parents is addicted to alcohol or drugs, it can mean your home life is incredibly challenging. These people should be taken care of, but the substance abuse may mean you have needed to take on the caring role. Worst of all, you may feel responsible for your parent’s behaviour – if only you were a better son or daughter,

maybe they wouldn't need to get high? This type of thinking is common, and a parent may have even told you this is the case, but it is vital you understand that none of this is your fault.

In the recovery community we talk about the 3 C's, and this refers to three things you need to understand about your parent's behaviour:

- you did not cause the addictive behaviour
- you cannot control the addictive behaviour
- it is not your job to cure the addiction

One of the key things you need to be doing if you are dealing with an addicted parent is getting plenty of support. There are 12-step fellowships like Al-Anon and Alateen – there is also Adult Children of Alcoholics if you are a bit older. You will also find help online, but it is better to get at least some face-to-face support. If your parent becomes ready for addiction treatment, you will want to be supportive of the idea, but it shouldn't be your job to sort everything out – especially if you are still a teenager.