

What Is Addiction Really Like?

When your loved one develops an addiction to drugs or alcohol, it often feels like you've lost a part of them to a world you don't understand. From the sidelines, their actions can seem confusing and irrational, and you may struggle to comprehend what is compelling them to behave in such an abjectly self-destructive way. If you have never experienced addiction yourself, it can be very difficult to grasp what living with addiction is really like, particularly if they deny they have a problem, leaving you to fill in the blanks. Gaining insight into what life looks like when you're an addict can help you better make sense of what your loved one is experiencing and identify possible avenues for intervention.

The Highs

No one starts using because it feels bad. The pleasure drugs and alcohol bring can be extraordinarily seductive, and if you are experiencing serious psychological distress it can feel more than good; it can feel like an answer. Depending on the type of drug you use, you may experience euphoria, confidence, joy, and a relief from both physical and emotional pain that is intensely powerful. And your brain takes notice; alcohol and drugs light up the brain's reward center, telling you that this is something you want to experience again and again. As you continue to use, your neural pathways adapt to account for your substance use and invite you to use with higher frequency and intensity to re-create the high.

The Lows

The pleasurable effects of drugs and alcohol are ephemeral and coming down can be crushing. Most types of drugs produce their effects by creating a sudden flurry of neurotransmitter activity in your brain, leaving you with depleted stores of essential neurochemicals in the aftermath, temporarily impairing your ability to experience normal emotional function, and it may become more difficult to experience a feeling of well-being without the substance. While people without addiction issues can take the comedown in stride and even see it as a sign that they shouldn't use again, for the addicted brain, the comedown is a signal to use more to escape the pain of withdrawal or the distress of sobriety. When you're not using, the cravings and physical withdrawal can be unbearable and you begin arranging your life to tend to them.

Types of Addiction

Addiction manifests in various ways, affected by a complex mix of factors such as substance type, personality traits, underlying mental health conditions, socioeconomic status, and social supports. While all addicts share an overwhelming compulsion to continue using despite the consequences of that use, what that looks like can take many different forms and fall along a spectrum between high-functioning and all-consuming addiction.

- **High-Functioning Addiction**

A high-functioning addict can often be difficult to spot because the superficial markers of addiction are largely absent; often these addicts will be professionally successful, have full social lives, and maintain relative emotional stability. However, despite appearances, they find themselves planning their lives around using, covering up their use, and taking real risks to continue using.

Many high-functioning addicts believe that their addiction is within their control because they have not yet experienced overt damage from their drug or alcohol use and it remains largely hidden to family and friends. Some believe that since they are not on skid row, they can't possibly have a problem. In fact, some even attribute their success to their drug use, such as in cases of Adderall or cocaine addiction, making it even harder to break free from the substance abuse.

- **All-Consuming Addiction**

For some, the addictive drive is so strong that it overpowers virtually every other aspect of their lives, including the things that are dearest to them; they lose friends, jobs, and money, they find themselves doing things they never imagined, like sharing needles, driving under the influence, or having unprotected sex with strangers, and their relationships with their families disintegrate as they devote themselves entirely to their addiction.

Simultaneously, the physical and neurological damage mounts, augmenting pre-existing mental health conditions and disrupting the ability to maintain healthy psychological function. Using has long-since stopped being fun and is now simply a way of feeding a need and getting through the day without emotional and physical agony.

Although some people fit firmly into the high-functioning or all-consuming addiction categories, most people fall somewhere in between and may move along the spectrum over time.

Barriers to Healing

It is easy to believe that drug addicts don't care about anything but drugs. In reality, many people struggling with addiction deeply mourn the loss of their former selves, experience deep shame and guilt for the damage their addiction has inflicted on their loved ones, live in fear of what their addiction will destroy next, and can't understand how their life has ended up this way. So why won't they reach out to you for help? These are some common reasons people struggling with drug and alcohol abuse don't talk to their loved ones about what they are experiencing:

- Fear that discontinuing use will compromise their ability to perform or cope.
- Fear of judgement, anger, rejection, and abandonment.
- Overwhelming shame about their addiction, their behavior, and the fact that they are unable to deal with their addiction themselves
- A desire to protect loved ones from the reality of the situation.
- Fear of losing custody of children or other legal ramifications.
- A belief that they can get their substance use under control without having to involve anyone else.
- Not being willing to give up friends, places, or situations that are directly connected to substance use.

Many addicts desperately want to recover and rebuild, but, trapped in the grip of their illness, they feel helpless to change their situations. If their addiction stems from self-medication to cope with emotional distress, the prospect of sobriety may be particularly uninviting, as they fear being cast into the world without armor. And so they remain, stuck between the pain of addiction and the fear of sober living.

Toward Healing

When your loved one is struggling with alcohol or drug addiction, understanding what they are going through can be a vital part of discovering how to nurture their recovery with compassion and empathy. While you may believe that your loved one is choosing drugs and alcohol over you, it's important to remember that addiction is making them choose drugs and alcohol over everything, including their own well-being.

If you have any questions regarding addiction, the recovery process, or how to guide your loved one toward treatment, we encourage you to contact us at any time. Our knowledgeable team of addiction specialists are always available to give you the support and information you need to help both you and your family member start the journey toward healing.

Please reach out to us at 888-475-8177.