



Frequently Asked Questions: Alcohol and Substance Abuse

About this information

If you have concerns about alcohol or substance abuse, there is no substitute for an in-person assessment by a reputable, qualified addictions counselor. This information is general in nature and is not meant to be an exhaustive response to the difficulties experienced in addressing alcohol or substance abuse.

Frequently Asked Questions

How would I know if I were an alcoholic or addicted to a drug?

Addiction counselors and other mental health professionals generally look for a pattern of the following:

- Negative consequences of alcohol/drug use
- An inability to quit or control alcohol/drug use
- A pattern of increased amounts and/or frequency of use

There is no single item that makes a person an alcoholic or drug-addicted. It is a combination of factors that helps a counselor determine if someone meets the diagnostic criteria for alcohol or drug dependence. (Alcohol dependence and drug dependence are different ways of saying someone is an alcoholic or addicted.)

What is the best way to approach a loved one about their alcohol or drug use?

It is important to approach someone whom you think may have a problem in a way that is non-confrontational. When you are upset with the person as a result of their drinking or use, it is usually not the best time to discuss it with them. Wait until the next day, then calmly express your concern without name calling, blaming or accusing. Simply say that you care about them and you've noticed how their use is affecting their life. Say that you would like them to see if they can stop their use, and if they can't, ask them to get professional help to stop.

It is normal for those who abuse alcohol or drugs to react angrily when they are approached even in a gentle, caring manner. If you argue with them or become angry and lash out at them, you only help them to focus on something besides their own use. If your initial approach to them does not seem to do any good, then seek out the assistance of close friends and family to help you speak to the person about their use. After your initial approach, don't hesitate to seek the advice of a qualified professional counselor.

I've heard of alcoholism and drug addiction described as a "disease." How can this be true?

Alcoholism and drug addiction have the same fundamental characteristics as physical diseases:

- They are progressive, meaning that they worsen over time without proper treatment.
- They are fatal. If untreated, they ultimately lead to death.
- There is an inherited biological connection that causes a pre-disposition or increased likelihood of a person having the diseases.
- They manifest in a predictable way regardless of whom they affect.



Frequently Asked Questions: Alcohol and Substance Abuse (cont.)

Often people interpret the word “disease” as meaning that the person does not bear any responsibility for their condition. However, even in many physical diseases, there is a clear connection between the person’s lifestyle and the onset of a physical problem. Regardless of how the condition developed, it is that person’s responsibility to seek proper medical care and follow their doctor’s advice in regard to lifestyle changes. Someone who is addicted has a disease, but the treatment of their disease involves accepting responsibility for taking the steps necessary to get the condition under control. Of course, every action carries with it a moral component. This is no less true for addiction problems. However, just as with a physical condition, judgement for moral failure is not the path to resolving the problem and is best left up to that person to address within the context of their belief system.

Once you become addicted, can you ever become cured?

Those who are alcoholics and/or drug addicted and have been able to stop through an active participation in a plan of recovery consider themselves to be recovering. This means that while they do not currently drink or use drugs they will always be susceptible to alcohol or drugs and will need to make significant lifestyle changes in order to continue to reinforce their new lifestyle. Addiction has such a profound effect on the individual that even when they no longer use or drink, their previous experiences have left a lasting impact on the way they view themselves and the world around them. Alcoholics and drug addicts don’t consider themselves to be cured, but they do consider themselves to be recovering and “no longer active” in alcohol or drug use.

I’ve heard the term “co-dependent” used. What does it mean?

“Co-dependent” is a general term for those who unwittingly become involved in helping the addicted person to continue their chemically dependent lifestyle in a variety of ways. Becoming co-dependent is often described as “having a normal reaction to an abnormal situation”. Addiction changes the “rules” by which we normally conduct our relationships with others and as a result, attempts to adapt to those changes often end up discouraging any positive change.

Some examples of co-dependent behavior are:

- Making repeated excuses for someone’s behavior while they are under the influence of alcohol or drugs.
- Questioning whether you are really the “crazy one” when you observe the addicted person’s behaviors.
- Attempts at removing the consequences of a person’s actions as a result of an addiction, thereby allowing them to continue in the same behaviors. (For example, paying traffic tickets or calling in sick to work for them.)
- Blaming the addicted person’s behaviors on external factors like “she’s been under a lot of stress.”

Co-dependency can be resolved through individual counseling with a qualified mental health professional and as part of an overall plan for addressing addiction problems. Help involves understanding the process of addiction and its impact on others, then acknowledging co-dependent behaviors and making behavior change, while receiving support from others for that positive change.

How can someone get confidential help for alcoholism and substance abuse?

All addiction and other mental health counselors and treatment providers are bound by federal regulations in regard to releasing information about care. Respect for confidentiality is at the core of any reputable counselor’s practice and any organization’s treatment program. As a result, information about someone in treatment will not be released by telephone or any other means without a signed consent to release information from that person, and/or a court order as stipulated by the regulations. Getting confidential help is simply a matter of getting help!