

6 Alcohol and drug addiction are mental health problems

Throughout human history, use of alcohol and other drugs has been a part of cultural and social practices. Widely available, they can be a routine and often positive part of many people’s social relationships. But for some, drinking alcohol or using drugs causes serious problems. When someone becomes addicted to drugs or alcohol, it harms their physical and mental health and affects the well-being of those around them. And addiction can make other mental health problems worse.

Addiction to alcohol or drugs can be a lifelong challenge. Treatment can help people get beyond their addictions, though recovery is rarely “one and done”—a person may have ups and downs for a long time. For many people, alcohol and drug problems become like other chronic diseases where you can stay well but it requires lifestyle changes and perhaps medication.

There’s no one solution for a person with an addiction and there isn’t one path to find it. Harm reduction (see page 95) is an approach that helps some people where they are at right now, opening the door to other support or treatment further on. Most importantly, people dealing with addiction need community support for healing and finding alternative ways to have meaning and pleasure in their lives.

When does use become misuse?

Alcohol and drug addictions can be hard for us to recognize or speak about. We may fear criticism, blame, or shame because these responses are so common. It can be hard to know that we need help and hard to ask for it.

When alcohol and drugs cause problems in a person’s life, usually it is related to how much is used, how often, and how much a person’s life is affected by alcohol or drug use. Here are some questions that can help someone identify when their alcohol or drug use is interfering with their relationships and daily life, and becoming a problem:

- Is it hard for me to get through the day without having a drink or using drugs?
Do I think about it all the time?
- Do I hide my use from others?
- Do I find I can’t stop drinking or using once I start?
- Have friends, family, or a health worker shown concern about my drinking or drug use?

These signs are more serious:

- Has my alcohol or drug use made it hard for me to work, keep a job, pay bills, or carry out family or other expected responsibilities?
- Has my drinking or drug use ever caused injury to me or someone else?
- Have I ever done something unsafe or illegal to get alcohol or drugs?



As a health worker, I ask these questions or have the person fill out a questionnaire privately before we talk. That way, I find out if this is on their mind and specific concerns without judging or pushing them. Then we can talk about their specific worries and what they might want to do about them.

Signs of addiction

Addiction is when a person is unable to control their alcohol or drug use, even though it is causing harm in their life. Signs of addiction that a person may feel or show include:

- physical problems when they stop using (called withdrawal), such as shaking, feeling irritable, or nausea; or more serious ones, such as mental confusion or seizures
- the need to use increasingly more of something to feel the same effect
- continued use of alcohol or drugs despite the harm it causes



Other activities that can become addictions

As with alcohol and drug use, other common activities can become a problem if they become too hard to stop or take over life in a way that is harmful. Most people handle video and computer games, shopping and collecting things, sex, eating, and even gambling in ways that remain healthy. But for some people, these activities become too much. Consider if you are hiding the behavior from others or if you can't stop thinking about it. Look at the questions that help people evaluate if their alcohol and drug use have become a problem (see pages 87 to 88). For example: Do you spend so much time playing video games that you have let people down, ignore school, work, or family responsibilities, have new financial problems, no longer sleep well, or stopped caring for your health?



As with worries about alcohol or drug addictions, saying “yes” to such questions may show it is time to get help. If you are looking out for someone else, tell them you are worried about what you see them going through (see pages 87 to 88). It may help them to get together with others who have faced the same situation (see page 131). Support groups for these addictions exist for in-person meetings and online, and include 12-step programs (following the Alcoholics Anonymous model), such as Gamblers Anonymous (see page 155).

Addiction and mental health challenges can occur together

In addition to being a mental health condition for which a person needs support and treatment, problems with alcohol and drugs can make it difficult to tell if someone also is facing challenges with other aspects of their mental health. When a person is going through both, they are often connected. They can both be a result of the same life circumstances or hardships, one could have helped caused the other, or one makes having the other worse.

Mental health challenges can lead to alcohol or drug misuse. Feeling anxious, sad, numb, or having physical pain can lead to alcohol or drug use to get through the day. Using alcohol or drugs to self-treat current or past pain or trauma (see page 34) is also common. The causes of these problems can be difficult to identify and hard to solve, and people may try to avoid feelings and thoughts about them by drinking or using drugs.

Alcohol and drug use can cover up the mental health challenge or a mental illness.

Alcohol or drugs might make a person feel better for a short time by stopping their emotional pain, but the cause of the pain remains. Meanwhile, their ongoing use of alcohol or drugs creates new problems.

Alcohol and drugs can make a mental health condition worse. Feeling anxiety, for example, can make someone want the good feeling that comes with drinking, but instead of going away, the anxiety could get worse. A severe mental health condition can become much worse with alcohol or drugs because both affect the brain, changing a person's thinking and actions.

Both mental health problems and addiction need to be treated

Because mental health problems and using alcohol or drugs are so connected, treating and managing them are also connected. For example: your friend is in terrible grief after losing his spouse. His alcoholism has returned as he drinks to cope with the loss. Any grief counseling would need to talk about the drinking, and any addiction treatment would need to confront his grief and what has changed in his life.



In our program, sometimes people say: "If I wasn't depressed, I wouldn't be addicted." But usually, that's not true. They will need help with both problems. In addition to tackling the addiction, they will need counseling and possibly medicines for the depression too.

Talking about addiction

People with alcohol and drug addiction often feel shame about what they are going through. They may downplay or cover up their alcohol or drug use, and avoid admitting how it is affecting their lives and the lives of their friends and families. Denial is often a part of this illness.

It may take a long time before a person with an addiction is ready to seek help.

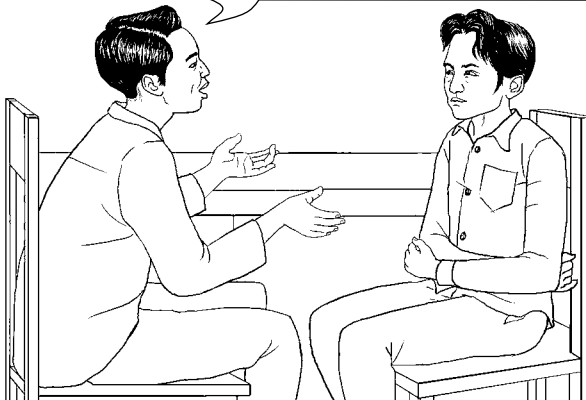
If you think someone in your life is misusing alcohol or drugs, if they show signs it is hurting them or the people around them, talking with them is a place to start. If the person does not believe they have a problem, just hearing you say you are worried may not convince them they need to make a change—but it is important to try. It may be on their mind as well.

HOW TO Talk with someone about alcohol and drug misuse—are they ready to get help?

The way to bring up alcohol or drug misuse can be similar to how to talk about other mental health challenges (see pages 26 to 27). Be mindful of your safety and how to get out of their way or out of the room in case the person gets angry.

- Don't wait until the person "hits bottom." Long before they are ready to ask for help, it may be on their mind or something they worry about.
- Plan to talk in a private, quiet place, when you both are sober.
- Start by saying you are concerned about their well-being and you care about them. Repeat this at the end.
- Mention specific examples of what you have seen that affects them, you, or others in negative ways.
- Do not judge, lecture, or even ask why they are using alcohol or drugs. Give them time to say whatever they want and listen carefully.
- Often people do not make any changes right away. They may need time to think about what you've said. But planting a first seed of the idea is something that may make a difference later.
- It is easy to feel frustrated if they deny there is a problem or become angry. These common responses are part of why getting help for problems from alcohol and drug use is so difficult.
- It can help to already know places where they can go to get help when they are ready.

Pooling our paychecks to cover mom's medical bills, I see you spend a lot on liquor instead of costs at home. And last week, I know you drove home after drinking too much. I'm really scared something bad could happen to you.



It can take many conversations before someone is ready to seek help

Because of shame and denial, it may take many conversations before someone with alcohol or drug addiction is ready to seek help. Besides family members, these conversations can also be started by friends, community health workers, and church or community leaders known and trusted by the person you want to help.

Family members need support too:



If someone is not ready to accept they want help, your life doesn't have to go on hold waiting for them. I tell the family members, "You have to take care of yourselves too!" Support groups can connect you to others going through the same situation. These include ACA (adult children of alcoholics) and Al-Anon groups. Goals are to focus on keeping yourself safe and emotionally OK and to avoid indirectly helping someone continue their addiction, for instance, by giving them money or covering up for them.

People struggling with addiction need support

As with other mental health challenges, shame and stigma block people from getting help to recover from problems with alcohol and drugs. When programs that support people struggling with addiction are made visible and available in the community, it lets everyone know where they can find help when they need it. Community education about addiction as a mental health problem—one that has social causes and can be treated—reduces stigma.

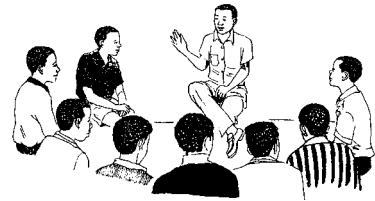
Treatment programs

Treatment programs offer the support needed to overcome addiction, usually by building community so no one feels alone in trying to recover and heal. They are designed so people can help and be helped by others. This creates positive spaces and ways to be with others that are not based on alcohol or drugs. It also makes clear that addiction is not only a personal problem, but a common illness shared with—and overcome by—many others. Some programs may combine group support with medication-assisted treatment. For example, to block some of the pleasurable effects of alcohol and reduce craving, naltrexone, either orally or by monthly injection, works well for some people as they participate in a treatment program.

Treatment programs offer different levels of support. For example, there are regular group meetings without changing your work or living situation; all-day treatment programs, but going home at night; or full-time residential treatment programs. People attending any of these programs may need months of help and support to heal from their addictions.

It can sometimes take 6 to 8 months for the body and brain to make an initial recovery from drug use. When the effects of addiction have lessened, it will be easier to work on other challenges, for example, to figure out if a person is hearing voices because of drug use or a different mental health condition.

Meetings: There are many support groups that hold meetings that are easy to find and free to attend. Some people overcome addiction through religious groups, in part because they attract people who share a similar worldview and want the same changes in their lives. Alcoholics Anonymous is one of several 12-step programs that have helped many people get and stay sober. There are also programs that do not involve a spiritual orientation, such as SMART recovery (smartrecovery.org), LifeRing Secular Recovery (lifering.org), and Women for Sobriety (womenforsobriety.org). Peer-led evening meetings in local schools or churches can provide a space where people know they will be understood and won't be judged.



Testing: Many programs use drug tests to monitor how people are doing. Testing clean can be a motivating goal, and needing to test clean can be a way to save face with others who would otherwise pressure you into using. Especially important is that testing prevents someone from being dishonest about their drug use. If the goal of their treatment is to stay sober, testing can show how well they are doing or that they need different treatment or more help.

Residential programs: Although some people resist going into residential treatment because it removes them from their family and community life, it works for many people for exactly that reason: it is very difficult to change what you do when you are still living among friends, family, and a community that has not changed. Health insurance and Medicaid may cover much of the initial cost of addiction treatment programs.

The National Helpline 1-800-662-HELP (4357), run by SAMHSA, the government's Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services, provides referrals to local treatment facilities, different types of support groups, and community-based organizations. It is a confidential, free, 24-hour-a-day, 365-day-a-year service offered in English and Spanish. Also visit the online treatment locator: findtreatment.gov, or send your zip code via text message: 435748 (HELP4U) to find support near you.



For people living on the streets, the combination of physical, social, and mental health stresses of being unhoused makes dealing with addiction almost impossible. We need more programs that provide mental health support and treatment for addiction while helping people transition into permanent housing.

Our outreach includes talking to young people and others who lack stable housing. If someone wants to connect to treatment, we help with that. But we don't see their drug use as any worse than when college students or tech workers do the same. When someone's situation is shaped by poverty or difficult conditions, people judge them more harshly or treat them as less than human. That prejudice needs to be challenged.



Support for people needing to detox

When someone with an addiction stops using drugs or alcohol, at first they feel terrible. Their body reacts with anything from mild anxiety, hand tremors, sweating, and headaches to serious conditions like seizures. Someone experiencing withdrawal needs help to detox safely as their body gets used to the change.

There are many detox facilities, and community advocacy efforts have forced many county public health systems to establish adequately staffed detox facilities accessible to all. Medical detox uses medicines to manage getting through withdrawal as medical staff monitor you around the clock, often for 5 to 10 days.

Other types of therapy such as chiropractic care, massage, acupuncture, and various integrative and traditional medicine practices can help people manage withdrawal symptoms and cravings during detox. Massage, for example, relieves tension, which can help with stress and physical pain. The traditional Chinese medical technique of acupuncture places thin needles into certain places on the body to help balance body energy and blood flow, supporting both physical and emotional health. Good nutrition and drinking enough water are also essential during detox and through recovery to enable the body to heal and rebuild after addiction.

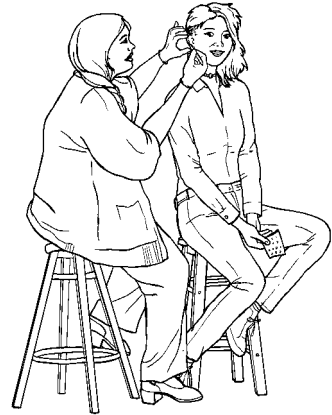
Community organizing brings detox acupuncture to the US

In the 1960s and 1970s, heroin addiction was a large and growing problem in New York City. While some people argued that US government agencies sent heroin into African American and Latinx communities to keep people disempowered, everyone recognized how the lack of effective addiction treatment services harmed Black and Brown communities.

Following a trip to China, members of the Black Panther Party joined with other South Bronx community groups to create the first acupuncture detox clinic at Lincoln Hospital in 1970. Acupuncture was combined with community outreach methods and social programs to promote access to addiction treatment, health care, and hope. While the government attacked and eventually closed the program, acupuncture as an effective drug treatment method spread throughout the US and continues today.

Community-based acupuncture and acupressure

Acupuncture and acupressure (putting pressure on key body points) helps people manage cravings and withdrawal symptoms. The *People’s Organization of Community Acupuncture* (POCA) works to put acupuncture and acupressure “in the hands of the community.” While certification requirements vary by state, POCA’s Ear Circle program trains and supports non-acupuncturists to provide ear acupuncture. Called Auricular Acu-Technicians, they treat points on the outer ear with needles or with “ear seeds” (commercially available stickers that put pressure on ear acupressure points). These methods can help with addiction, recovery, trauma, pain, and stress. They can be used in mental health, treatment, and recovery programs, and in a variety of community settings. Training more people to do this therapy provides more than one kind of support. For example, when a POCA-certified therapist demonstrates treatment at a meeting, group members receive an important service as well as discover a valuable resource within their own community.



Harm reduction strategies

Strategies to make drug use less risky are called harm reduction. Even if people do not want to stop using or misusing drugs or alcohol, harm reduction can improve or save lives and limit harms by reducing overdoses and lessening the spread of infections, including HIV and hepatitis C. Harm reduction efforts include needle exchanges, ways to test the contents of people’s drugs, and training on and access to naloxone (often known by the brand name *Narcan*), a medication to reverse overdose. Harm reduction programs can also provide a path for people to begin to remedy trauma, lack of social support, or other issues related to their addictions.

Another type of harm reduction for people with addiction to heroin or other opioids is to provide them with drugs such as methadone or buprenorphine (suboxone, bupe). They are much less dangerous, though they still create dependency. Medical oversight is needed to slowly lessen their use, and many people need them long-term. Methadone and buprenorphine are legal and prevent overdose, withdrawal symptoms, and cravings, allowing someone to work on other challenges and live their life without the health, social, legal, and financial problems that accompany heroin and opioid use. These treatments save lives and give people more stability.



Our peer-run harm reduction program sees drug use as an understandable response to difficult life circumstances, and recovery as an open-ended path that leads to different destinations. For us, the most important thing is not whether or not someone is using, it's whether their life is improving and working better for them.



Alcohol and drugs surround us

Alcohol and many kinds of drugs are part of everyday life. Wine or beer is commonly served with meals, and both alcohol and drugs are often part of social events and celebrations. Advertising constantly tells us that using them is part of “the good life,” and makes us the kind of people that others will like and want to be with. Ads never show people with alcoholism or dealing with the problems in the family it can cause.

Alcohol is often available in supermarkets and corner stores, and dispensaries and smoke shops make cannabis products increasingly easy to get. While the legalization of cannabis reduces the disproportionate imprisonment of people of color, it may lead to increased drug use in the community. This means our community organizations need to provide better education to youth about responsible drug use and drinking, make sure sober spaces and other ways to avoid drugs are available, and offer help and treatment when needed.



Guys pressure each other to drink in our community. We all live crowded together and there is nowhere to hide when someone says, “Just have one. It won't hurt you.” But if a medicine you are taking means you can't have alcohol, they respect that. Also, if you say you are jurado, meaning you made a pledge in church not to drink for Lent or something, they respect that too. Our local priest hands out cards for anyone who pledges to the Virgin of Guadalupe. Then they can just show others their card.

Working with youth to prevent misuse of alcohol and drugs

Misuse of alcohol or drugs happens more often to people who grow up with misuse around them. It is also more common for people with parents or grandparents who have problems with addiction, even if they never lived with or knew those family members. There is also more risk if someone suffered trauma or abuse as a child.

Knowing this can help leaders of community programs or caretakers watch out for young people in these situations, and a person aware of their family history may be able to take steps to avoid misuse. In general, having community structures and people who look out for teens and young people, and providing caring support through all the transitions of this life-stage can help prevent general mental health challenges as well as specific problems of misuse of drugs (see pages 87 to 88).



When kids use drugs, they are far more likely to develop lifelong problems because it affects their fast-developing brains more permanently. This is why programs that keep kids busy with sports, arts, and activities to help the community are so important—by delaying the use of alcohol or drugs for as many years as possible, it buys time for healthy brain development. Telling parents to “know where your children are” doesn’t really help unless we are creating safe places where they want to go and spend time.

Spaces that are alcohol and drug-free

It is harder for people who have overcome alcohol or drug addiction to avoid using them when alcohol is made available everywhere and drugs may be easy to get. City, neighborhood, and community groups can design activities and events where no alcohol is served or where consuming alcohol isn’t a central activity.

Our college campus has group housing run by cooperatives. Residents make, follow, and enforce the house rules. The largest coop residence hall is alcohol-free and drug-free. The students who live there can choose to use substances elsewhere, but everyone is committed to keeping substances out of where they live. For students who struggled with addictions before coming to college, this housing option is a life-saver.



Turn down the money. The alcohol industry donates to community festivals and events across the US to associate their brands with generosity and to fill community spaces with their advertising. The North Dakota Department of Health encourages community groups to turn down sponsorship from alcohol companies and local bars so advertising and branded giveaways don’t contribute to normalizing or making binge-drinking glamorous. Many events organized by tribes or held on American Indian reservations are also purposefully alcohol-free for the same reasons. In 1998, the city of Oakland, California, effectively banned all alcohol advertising by specifying that signs advertising alcohol cannot be put up within 1,000 feet of churches, schools, recreation centers, and childcare facilities.

