

# Understanding addiction: Why do we get addicted to substances?



**Addiction can be caused by many factors including genetics, trauma, stress, depression or anxiety disorders. Those who are genetically predisposed may find themselves more likely to develop an addiction if they suffer from chronic stress or abuse substances as a way to cope with their problems.**

## What causes addiction?

There are many different reasons why we become addicted to things. Some people are born with genetic predispositions towards certain addictions. For example, many genes contribute to an individual's susceptibility to alcoholism. Yet, scientists don't know how these genes interact with each other which makes it difficult to identify individuals who are more likely to develop alcohol abuse problems.

Others may experience traumatic events early in life causing them to develop addictive behaviours later in life. People who struggle with mental health issues like depression or anxiety often turn to drugs and alcohol to self-medicate and some people simply enjoy the high of being able to escape reality through substance use.

There are many different factors in play but the most prominent ones include dopamine release (the pleasure hormone), a hedonic adaptation which means we get used to those experiences which end up becoming less satisfying over time. But no matter how it started, everyone reading this article should know that recovery from addiction is possible.

## The pleasure principle

People who are highly sensitive to pleasure (HSP) may be more likely to engage in addictive behaviours. This could be due to HSP individuals being reactive and seeking out positive stimuli, which leads them into addiction-like behaviour patterns more often than those without the trait.

Another possibility is that these people have trouble differentiating between real life rewards versus imagined ones; resulting in greater reward seeking behaviour overall.

## Risk factors

People are different when it comes to developing addictions and some people are more susceptible than others. It can be triggered due to genetics and poor social support networks, but some people develop addictions because they were trauma victims or suffer from co-occurring mental illnesses such as depression which made them more susceptible in general than someone without these illnesses would be. A recent study also found that 74% of people who entered drug rehab were under the age of 30 making these demographics most likely candidates for future addictive behaviours if left unchecked.

## What happens to the brain when a person takes drugs?

Addicts continue using even when they know this behaviour is harmful. If you've ever taken a drug, you know it's not just a physical experience. It has a profound effect on your mental state.

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Drugs change the way your brain works. They affect neurotransmitters like dopamine, serotonin, and norepinephrine – chemicals that play a role in regulating mood, motivation, attention, and memory. Drug use causes surges of dopamine in your brain's reward centre making you crave more. Over time our brains adapt by reducing the ability of neurons in the reward circuit to react.

This results in addicts feeling less pleasure than before they started using drugs. They may also need to take more of the drug to get the same feeling and eventually, they stop enjoying anything else. Long term, drug use affects other parts of your brain besides the part that's stimulated. This includes things such as learning, judgment, decision making, stress, memory, and behaviour.

## Why do some people become addicted to drugs while others don't?

It's not yet clear why some people develop addictions while others don't. Some experts believe it has to do with the way our brains process rewards and punishment, which is also called incentive salience, in other words, the difference between "liking" and "wanting".

Another explanation could be that those predisposed towards addictiveness are simply born with certain personality traits. For example, being easy-going yet self-centred might qualify even though neither trait alone directly causes someone to become addicted.

## Do you have an addiction?

**You may be addicted if you answered yes to any of these questions:**

- Have you ever felt like your use of substances has caused problems in one or more relationships?
- Has your work or school performance ever suffered due to drinking or drug use?
- Do you use substances when alone or when you first wake up in the morning?
- Do you think about drugs or alcohol between using them?
- Have you ever needed medical attention for the misuse of a substance or had a health scare because of it?

## What to do if you or someone you know is suffering from an addiction

If you or someone you know has developed an addiction, it's important to seek treatment. A person who suffers from addiction may be suffering from depression or other mental illnesses as well. To get help, they need to know what your problem is, so talking to someone about how they feel is an important first step on the road to recovery. For initial guidance, you can also try online tests and quizzes designed to help you identify characteristics of certain conditions.

### Before you go...

If you think you might have an addiction problem, talk to one of our trained Validium counsellors, your doctor or your therapist first. They can help you figure out what kind of treatment would be best for you.

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