

**Understanding Drug Addiction and the Ways in Which
We Can Help Recovering Addicts Stay Sober**

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Addiction is present all over the world today, the problem is only getting worse, and we need to do something about it. There are many factors that cause addiction, including the environment the addict grew up in, how they were treated by their parents, and even genetics play a huge role in addiction. Childhood trauma, mental illness, and personality disorders are also factors in the development of an addiction. Society tends to punish addicts by giving them criminal records, or putting a label on them, therefore, not allowing them to be as successful as they could be when they are in the recovery stage. Addiction is a real, but preventable disease and we can help prevent as a society by helping recovering addicts re-integrate into society instead of punishing them and taking away opportunities from them.

There are many factors that play into whether a person becomes a drug addict. Carpenito-Moyet, a family nurse practitioner and author of the *Nursing Diagnosis* series of books, wrote the editorial "The Myths of Drug Addiction" after she spent some time interacting with addicts at a rehabilitation facility. In her time spent at the rehabilitation facility Carpenito-Moyet (2003) noticed that most of the addicts she spoke to had some things in common like dysfunctional families, violence, parental substance abuse, abusive childhoods, sexual abuse, and parents who would enable them to use drugs (p. 3-4). The addicts who came from good families were the ones mostly found to have the enabling parents who let their children get away with misbehaving and never acknowledged their child's bad behavior and made excuses for the child's mistakes; these addicts do not usually have jobs, and lack traits such as responsibility, preventing them from recovering from their addiction. There are also substance-

dependent parents who give drugs or alcohol to their children when they are very young; these parents are different than the ones mentioned above, but ultimately they are also enabling their children to fall into addiction. "Using drugs is a choice" and quitting the use of drugs is also a choice, but it is harder to quit for some addicts due to a lack of support from loved ones, inner strength, or simply not believing in themselves (Carpenito-Moyet, 2003, p. 3). On the other hand, some addicts do have the necessary tools to lead them to sobriety, but it is up to them to use those tools and do the work that is needed to get them to sobriety.

Addiction is a very hard thing to understand, unless a person has been addicted to something before; the best way to describe the feeling of addiction is when an individual wants something so bad that they do not care about the consequences that come with obtaining what it is they want, in this case drugs or alcohol. Addiction is irrational and addicts know this, but they do not care and this can be used to prove that addiction is a real mental and physical disease and can lead addicts to make irrational decisions in order to get high; Carpenito-Moyet (2003), says "When a fix is needed an addict can do anything do access the drug—use the rent money, steal mom's rent money, water down drugs to sell, abandon their children, knowingly infect themselves with HIV" (p. 4). Because of this known behavior from addicts, it is easy for other people to be fooled into thinking that is the real personality of the addict, but most of the time that is not the case and we need to learn to be more understanding and look at the person that is really there behind all the drugs and alcohol. However, addiction is a preventable disease and we can help prevent it by beginning to understand where it comes from and how it happens.

Humans have the natural need to bond with something or someone; Hari, a writer and journalist, gave a Ted Talk in 2015 called *Everything You Think You Know About Addiction Is Wrong*, in which he asks his audience to think about why not all hospital patients who have been on heavy drugs, such as diamorphine, come out of the hospital addicted to the drug. His answer to this question was the result of an experiment conducted by Professor Alexander in the 20th century, in which he put a rat in a cage with one bottle of clean water and another bottle of water laced with either heroin or cocaine, and another rat in a cage he called “Rat Park” where they had toys, tunnels, food, other rats to mate with and both the clean and the heroin water. The results showed that the rats in the isolated cage almost always preferred the drug water and would keep drinking out of it until they died, and the rats in “Rat Park” almost never drank the drug water or did not use it compulsively, they went from almost one hundred percent overdose to zero percent overdose. Looking at this study and other drug research around the world, Hari (2015) concludes that humans naturally want to bond with people they love, have healthy relationships and jobs they love and if they cannot do it, because of a trauma or mental illness, they will find something else to bond with such as drugs, gambling, or pornography. Hari (2015) explains a great possibility that inability to bond with people and activities is a cause of addiction.

Scientists have been researching genetics and epigenetics for causes of addiction and have found genetics to be responsible for fifty percent of addiction risk. According to Szalavitz (2015), a science writer based in New York city, “an enormous number of factors, ranging from early life trauma to genes that code for metabolic enzymes, have a role in how the genetics of addiction unfold” (p. S48). Szalavitz, shares her findings through research that the risk of a child

who is being raised by alcohol-dependent-parents developing alcohol addiction is almost the same as a child who is raised by adoptive parents who are not addicts but whose birth parents are, in other words even if a child is placed in healthy living conditions and provided with love, care, friends, shelter, food, water, etc., he or she still has a high chance of becoming alcohol-dependent if it was passed on to them through their genes (p. S48).

Mental health is also closely related to our genes and people with addiction disease often have a linked mental illness or personality disorder. According to Szalavitz (2015) the closest related illness to addiction is antisocial personality disorder including behaviors similar to drug addiction such as dishonesty, manipulation, insensitivity, and criminality (p. S48). What scientists are failing to look at is the clear factor that addicts are self-medicating to cope with symptoms caused by a mental illness that they cannot control otherwise, a personality disorder they might have that is making them believe they need drugs, or causing them to end up using drugs and potentially leading them to become an addict. Szalavitz's (2015) article supports genetic factors being a cause of drug addiction and proves that addiction is a real disease and not a myth or simply a matter of will power or self-discipline.

However, addictive personalities are a big controversy because there is not enough evidence to support that such a type of personality exists. There appears to be no specific type of personality among drug addicts. According to Kerr (1996), from the University of Surrey, Milford Hospital, in Godalming, Surrey, there have been different traits found in addicts, such as low self-esteem, high-anxiety, low-frustration tolerance, demanding attention, psychopathy, impulsiveness, and an interest in the arts, especially music (p. S10). However, the list of traits goes on and similar traits were not found in addicts meaning that these traits are not enough to

prove that addictive personalities are real. Kerr explains that interviewing addicts as a form of research can be highly unreliable due to the possibility that the interviewees may be lying and answering the interviewer's questions as they think they should instead of answering them honestly. Some of the answers from the interviewees regarding questions about their personalities may also be caused by the change in the brain from using drugs. In other words, addicts may have answered these questions differently before they started using drugs.

Looking at this information it's easy to see why some people do not think addiction is a real disease but a matter of compulsion or the choices we make. Kerr (1996) states that "the central feature of addiction is compulsion or the inability to exercise free will or free choice" and that addiction is "characterized by: 'continuation of the behavior despite a sincere desire to stop' and 'a significant deviation from the bounded rationality that underpins human decision making'" (p. S11). This illustrates that humans do not use their freedom of choice as well as they should, and that humans do not really think about all the possible and negative outcomes when making a decision such as going to the bar or staying home and watching TV; they simply choose without looking into their decisions very deeply.

Understanding addiction and where it comes from is necessary in order for addicts to get clean and successfully maintain a long-term recovery. Gubi, a former professor in the Department of Social Studies and Counseling at the University of Chester in the United Kingdom, and Marsden-Hughes, a psychotherapist at a company that provides behavioral care also located in the United Kingdom, conducted a study based on the experiences that recovering alcoholics have gone through the transition from drinking, to becoming alcoholics, to leading a sober lifestyle, what they had to do to get sober, and how they are successfully

maintained a long-term recovery. The participants in their study reported that alcohol became an addictive part of their lives. When they started to feel dissatisfied with themselves, they thought they could not cope with life, experienced fear, shyness, self-hated, insecurity, self-contempt, isolation, loneliness, boredom, emotional immaturity, and they did not feel in control of their lives. They felt that they were failures, had low self-esteem, and were disappointed with themselves (2013, p. 203). Gubi and Marsden-Hughes (2013), explain that long-term recovery (LTR) is a three-step continuous process consisting of achieving sobriety, maintaining sobriety, and recovery. They then go on to report that the individuals who participated in the study reported that by being sober they became aware of changes such as their behavior and cognition (p. 205). Individuals in LTR also explain the how important it is to transition from being sober to living in sobriety, where it is highly suggested they eliminate anything or anyone from their lives that may cause them to relapse. Recovery is the final step through which remaining sober and maintaining sobriety is achieved (p. 206). Recovery is also the hardest step to maintain, as it is an ongoing process where recovering addicts will need to find the mental strength and self-discipline they never had in order to stay in recovery.

McIntosh, a professor and book author who is academically interested in drug use and abuse, and McKeganey the founding director of the Centre for Drug Misuse Research at the University of Glasgow, conducted interviews with 70 recovering addicts asking them how they got sober and what are their main strategies for maintaining sobriety. McIntosh and McKeganey (2000) came to the conclusion that there are two main strategies to getting sober and staying sober, they are "avoidance of their former drug-using network and friends," and "the development of a set of non-drug-related activities and relationships" (p.179). Drug addiction is

not an easy disease to beat, as maintaining sobriety is a life-long process that recovering addicts will have to deal with. Making the decision to quit is the first step; however, that is not enough, and addicts must act on their decision to quit by accepting powerlessness and seeking help from others, such as family, friends, therapists, and rehabilitation facilities. Putting distance between the people and places where drugs are available to addicts is crucial and a very good place for them to begin their journey into sobriety.

Addicts need to stay away from their drug-using friends, and sometimes even their families or partners if they are exposing them to a possible relapse, although on some occasions drug-using partners might be a motivation to quit using drugs if they both make an “abstinence pact” and decide to seek help together. New activities and relationships are needed to fill the gap that drugs will leave in your life (McIntosh & McKeganey, 2000, p. 183). Leading a long, drug-using lifestyle will leave a gap in an addict’s life that needs to be filled with positive activities and relationships. Addicts will become bored when they are no longer using because they are so used to being out looking for their next hit, gathering money any way possible to buy their drugs, and getting high. Boredom is one of the main reasons that addicts relapse and that is why it is so important to fill that gap with positive things. It is best to be occupied mentally and physically, by doing things such as attending school or working out (McIntosh & McKeganey, 2000, p. 188). By finding positive relationships, activities, and hobbies addicts will have too much to lose if they relapse and this will motivate them to stay clean.

Because of these issues, helping recovering addicts integrate back into society is crucial for them to maintain sobriety and obtain a successful career and healthy lifestyle, but society tends to do the complete opposite and punishes addicts instead. Hari (2015) claims that we

punish addicts by shaming them instead of helping them reconnect into society. According to Hari, in 2000 one percent of the population in Portugal was addicted to heroin and Portugal decided to decriminalize all drugs and to take all the money they were spending on disconnecting addicts and instead spent it on reconnecting them to society by creating jobs for addicts and microloans for them to set up small businesses. Fifteen years after this decision taken by Portugal, “injecting drug use is down in Portugal according to the *British Journal of Criminology*, by fifty percent, five-zero percent. Overdose is massively down, HIV is massively down among addicts. Addiction in every study is significantly down” (Hari, 2015). This is a large-scale piece of evidence that points toward the efficacy of not simply treating addicts with institutionalization, but with a larger socialization.

Leis and Rosenbloom (2009), an independent consultant specializing in public health and substance abuse issues, and a Professor of Public Health at the Boston University School of Public Health where he focuses on US and international health policy and issues relating to substance use disorder, states that “...for those who do receive treatment, the road to acceptance as functioning members of the community remains fraught with difficulty. They struggle with the stigma of addiction on a daily basis and they face discrimination from many different sources, ranging from their own family members to the federal government” (p. 275). Leis and Rosenbloom (2009) discuss the many obstacles recovering addicts face in order to obtain a job, health care and the way society often looks at individuals who use or have used drugs as criminals or as being shameful:

Federal, state, local, and private policies create many of these barriers. Furthermore, many of these bans apply only to people who have problems with alcohol or other

drugs. They apply to people with and without drug convictions, not to others who have committed acts of violence or other criminal offenses or social disruption. And they make treatment, recovery, and simply reestablishing one's self in society virtually impossible for many. (p. 276)

It is important to bring up these issues because these are issues that many people do not place importance on because they believe that addiction is not a real disease and that the addict has the complete power to stop on their own, but if this was true then there would not be addicts in rehabilitation facilities begging for help to stop using substances. There are many things we can improve as a society in order to help individuals with addiction problems in our community to maintain long-term recovery and form positive bonds with loved ones and activities they enjoy, and the first step requires us to make a decision to welcome them back in and support their recoveries. This will require a change in values and opinions about addicts and addiction; however, doing that will not only help save lives, but will save money spent on drug-related issues, as well as decrease economic losses that arise out of drug addiction. Changing our attitudes and approaches toward addiction will do more than help addicts: it will help us all.

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