

FACT SHEET #5

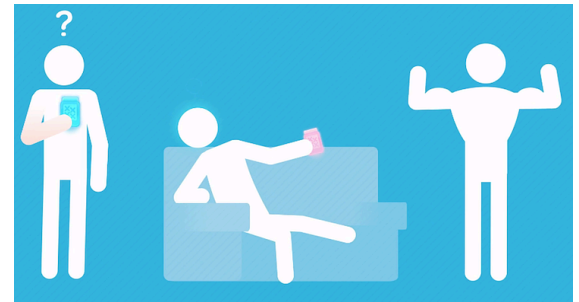
UNDERSTANDING SUBSTANCE ABUSE & ADDICTION

"My addiction took me to dark places in my soul. Nothing, I mean nothing else mattered except the next fix. I hated myself. I was destroying myself and those around me. But I couldn't stop."

Anonymous

WHAT IS SUBSTANCE ABUSE?

Many people across the community use both legal and illegal recreational and prescription drugs. People use drugs for many different reasons. Some of the reasons people use drugs include curiosity, fun, improving performance, relieving stress, or as a way to cope with uncomfortable thoughts and feelings. For most people, this use is legal and never leads to abuse or addiction, and has no or minimal negative consequences.



However, for some, their use of substances causes problems at home, work, in their relationships, and with the law. For some, their substance use may also cause significant physical and psychological issues. This is substance abuse.

Substance abuse is when drugs, including alcohol, prescription medication, and legal and illegal drugs are used to the extent that it has a harmful and negative impact on a person's life. Whilst substance abuse is a mental health issue in itself, the misuse of substances is linked to causing the development of other mental illness such as depression and anxiety, and to exacerbating existing mental health issues. Substance abuse often leads to addiction.

WHAT IS ADDICTION?

Addiction is a complex phenomenon.

Addiction to drugs is when someone feels physically and psychologically compelled to take a drug.

Whilst different drugs produce different effects – the same biological mechanism in our brain helps us understand compulsive drug use. At a basic biological level, taking a drug produces a reduction in physical and/or psychological pain. This is accompanied by a subsequent feeling of pleasure. Our brain remembers this feeling and wants it repeated. The urge to seek this feeling again is intense and feels uncontrollable. This feeling becomes easily rationalised and more important than anything else, including family, friends, career, finances, and even personal health and happiness. It is this overwhelming and all-consuming nature of addiction that is heart-breaking for all the individuals involved in living with addiction.

INCIDENCE OF SUBSTANCE ABUSE

Approximately 5 in 100 Australians have a substance abuse problem.

The misuse of alcohol is the most common substance abuse problem in Australia. In fact, alcohol misuse causes twice as many deaths as road accidents each year.

Pharmaceuticals and methamphetamines are the other more common and growing substance abuse drugs of choice in Australia.

DIAGNOSING SUBSTANCE ABUSE

It can be difficult to know if someone has a substance abuse or addiction issue. Individuals often work to conceal their symptoms and downplay their problem. GPs, psychologist and psychiatrists are the only professionals qualified to provide a diagnosis for substance abuse or addiction.

There is a very fine line between **occasional use**, **regular use**, and **substance abuse**. It is very difficult when someone who has an addiction to recognise that there may be a problem. While the frequency or amount of drugs consumed don't themselves constitute addiction, they are often indicators of a substance abuse problem, which could lead to addiction.

Nevertheless, there are some physical, behavioural and emotional signs that someone may have a substance abuse or addiction issue.

SOME OF THE COMMON PHYSICAL SIGNS ARE:

- Deterioration of appearance, personal grooming and hygiene.
- Ongoing otherwise unexplained health problems.
- Tremors, slurred speech or impaired coordination.

SOME OF THE COMMON BEHAVIOURAL SIGNS ARE:

- Neglecting responsibilities and usual activities.
- An aggressive or withdrawn manner.
- Unexplained financial problems.

SOME OF THE COMMON EMOTIONAL SIGNS ARE:

- Unexplained change in personality or attitude.
- Sudden mood swings.
- Periods of unusual hyperactivity or agitation.

CAUSES AND TREATMENT OF SUBSTANCE ABUSE AND ADDICTION

Unfortunately, the exact cause of substance abuse and addiction is not clear.

However, over 50 years of research has identified the most effective treatment options and principles to help individuals stop using, avoid relapse and recover their lives. Whilst no single treatment approach is appropriate for everyone, the two most important elements of treatment include:

- 1 Medication.
- 2 Evidence-based behavioural therapies through group and individual counselling.

In addition, successful treatment is based on treatment being available when and where it is needed, and individuals remaining in treatment for an adequate period of time.

It can be difficult for someone to accept they may have a problem and to ask for help. If you suspect someone you know may have a substance abuse or addiction issue the most helpful thing, at the right time and place, is to say "Hey, I've noticed you struggling a bit lately, let me know if there is anything I can do to help." and go from there.

If you or someone you know needs help contact **TIACS** on 0488 846 988 or your organisation's Employee Assistance Program (EAP), your GP or call: **LifeLine** on 13 11 14, **Kids Helpline** on 1800 551 800, **MensLine Australia** on 1300 789 978 or the **Suicide Call Back Service** on 1300 659 467.