



Addictions

every connection matters™



What is Addiction?

Addiction can be characterised as a dependence on a substance, behaviour, or activity that continues to occur, despite causing harm or having potentially negative impacts on someone's life. Addictions bring about a different mental state – often to feel good or to stop/avoid feeling bad.

Although often associated with drugs and alcohol, an individual can be addicted to any behaviour or activity. Common addictions include gambling, sex, gaming, shopping, food, and even exercise.

Physical and Psychological Addiction

Addictions can have both physical and psychological elements.

Physical Addiction occurs when your body becomes dependent on a substance to function. Physical dependencies often involve developing a tolerance for a substance, which means an individual needs to use more to have the desired impact. When your body is physically addicted to a substance, reducing or stopping substance use can lead to symptoms of withdrawal. These can range from mild symptoms like nausea and vomiting to more serious symptoms such as psychosis or seizures.

Psychological Addiction is an emotional state caused by how the substance or behaviour impacts the dopamine receptors in our brain. Dopamine is a chemical that is linked to feelings of pleasure. When we are addicted, doing these activities or behaviours increases the level of dopamine in our brain. When we stop and our dopamine levels decrease, we can experience symptoms such as cravings, irritability, and insomnia.

When we have a psychological addiction, our pleasure centre (dopamine levels) becomes hijacked in a detrimental way. This means that the things that would normally give us pleasure – e.g., spending time with family, etc. – no longer produce the levels of dopamine they normally would. This increases our urges and cravings for the substance or activity that we may have an addiction to.

Signs of an Addiction

There are several signs that may indicate you have an addiction to a substance or behaviour. These include:

- You need more and more of the substance or activity to have the desired or same effects
- You find it difficult to stop, even if you want to
- Your use is creating issues in your life, such as troubles in your relationships, work or school, financially, or even with the law
- You spend a lot of time thinking about it, including when you will next engage in doing it, how good you felt the last time you did it, or how you might go about getting more of it
- You hide your use or behaviour from family, friends, and other loved ones
- You spend less time with loved ones and make excuses as to why you can't see them
- You have lost interest in the things that used to be enjoyable
- You are borrowing, selling, or stealing things in order to maintain the use or behaviour
- You have been unsuccessful in trying to stop the behaviour or substance use.

If you find some of this resonating with you or someone you know, there are things you can do that may aid you in restoring your relationship with your addiction.

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acacia EAP
employee assistance program

Supporting Yourself with an Addiction

A good place to start is to gain awareness of your relationship with your addiction. Give thought to what you would like your relationship to look like, and what small goals to set. As you strive towards these goals, keep note of your thoughts and feelings towards your addiction – start to gain a sense of themes or patterns. This insight can help you understand what choices and actions you want to take to support yourself.

For example, perhaps you identify a need to learn how to say no. For many, setting boundaries is a core step in the change process. Reflecting upon your boundaries is often key to reducing and/or ceasing engagement with your addiction. It will become clear over time what your boundaries are or where they need to align so that you may be successful in your goals. Once set, it can be an incredibly empowering experience, as every time you set a boundary, you are making a choice to take back control.

When reflecting on your boundaries, you may find you also need to establish new friendships that don't relate to your addiction. The people that you have historically engaged in particular behaviours with and/or associate your addiction with may struggle to support you. They may also serve as triggers, encouraging you to fall back into old habits. It can be challenging to end these relationships as they once filled and supported a need. It's important to be critical and to hold your needs at the forefront; unfortunately, not all connections will be able to withstand the change.

A practical step you might take is to start scheduling your time. Build a routine for your day, ensuring you have a structure that helps you account for your time. Make sure to include activities that focus on your self-care, provide you with a sense of achievement and purpose, and, most importantly, align with your goals.

These aren't easy questions to consider or steps to take, and finding what works for you may take trial and error. Remember support is always available and your EAP may be the best starting point in your journey.

Supporting Another with an Addiction

If you are concerned about a friend or family member who might have an addiction, it can be helpful to know what signs to look out for, like those mentioned above. Changes in their behaviour, appearance, and even their environment can also be signs of addiction.

When starting a conversation with them, try to understand what they're going through. If you jump in early and tell them what to do, they are likely to retreat and feel further criticised. Show support and patience by listening without judgement. Be transparent and open about what you have observed and your concerns for them. Let them know you are there for them.

If they are open to seeking support, encourage them to take those first steps. Linking in with their EAP may support them in raising awareness of their relationship with their addiction. EAP provides an opportunity to consider the relationship they wish to have, the skills and strategies they will need to develop to draw upon, and the steps they can take to stay committed to both themselves and their goals.



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