

Commonly Abused Substances

The four types of substances most commonly abused—separately and in combinations—are alcohol, sedative/hypnotics (opioid narcotics, primarily heroin), prescription pain medication such as oxycodone and Vicodin, and stimulants (cocaine and amphetamines). Nicotine, while highly addictive and abused, is generally not regarded in the same context as other abused drugs. The best estimates for substance abuse suggest that 5% to 10% of American adults have a serious alcohol problem, and up to 10% have a serious drug problem. Prescription opioid abuse is the fastest growing drug problem and prescription opioids are a gateway to heroin. Overdose deaths from heroin have skyrocketed. Most of the increase in drug-related deaths is due to misuse of prescription drugs rather than illicit drugs. By virtue of sheer numbers, substance abusers contribute significantly to many social problems: violent crime, domestic abuse and neglect, illness, reduced productivity in the workplace and at home, and increased medical claims.

Cause and Consequence

At the root of substance abuse is a complex pattern that involves the drug, individual psychology, and the social environment. The effects and consequences of substance abuse take their toll on every aspect of life with its complement of personal, family, health, legal and employment problems. Those who are using are unlikely to see their substance abuse as a problem until there is a crisis or “bottoming out.” Left to themselves, all abusers (addicts) will sooner or later reach the “bottom.” This must occur for healing to begin.

Know the Signs – Understand Your Role

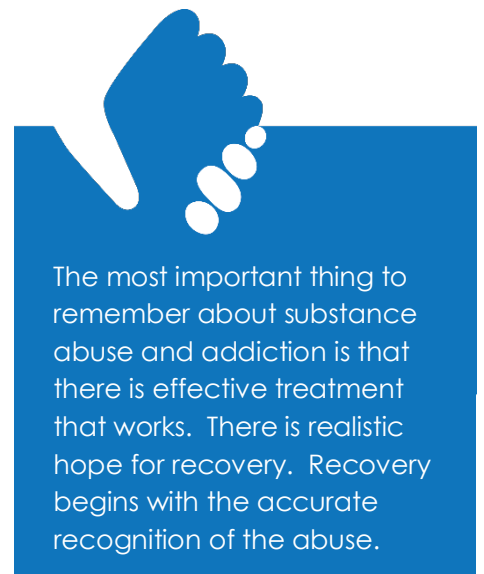
Substance abusers live in a world of fear, resentment, guilt, anxiety, and insecurity. Most abusers deal with all this through denial, which is a psychological mechanism or process by which human beings protect themselves from something that is threatening to them by blocking knowledge of that thing from their awareness.

When the abuser becomes dependent on a chemical, she or he experiences diminished physical, psychological, and behavioral health, typically in a relentless and progressive fashion.

Physical: Since the chemicals are poisonous to the body, eventually vital organs—brain, heart, liver, pancreas—are destroyed, resulting in death.

Psychological: Abusers must constantly rationalize or manipulate reality to explain the problems their abuse or dependence creates. In addition to rationalizing and manipulation, blaming, hostility, minimizing, and diversion may characterize the denial. Denial is automatic, progressive and operates below the level of awareness.

Behavioral: Drinking and drug use dominates the behavior of abusers. They think about it constantly, give it their money and attention, and will lie and deceive for it. They will risk all for it despite all the harm it causes them.



The most important thing to remember about substance abuse and addiction is that there is effective treatment that works. There is realistic hope for recovery. Recovery begins with the accurate recognition of the abuse.

If you or someone close to you needs help with a substance abuse problem, call your Employee Assistance Program (EAP). The EAP offers assessment, counseling or referral to appropriate resources.