

The Six Stages of Addiction

Addiction is a progressive disease. Because substance use and abuse changes a person's brain, what starts out as curiosity or a fix for boredom rapidly becomes an uncontrollable compulsion. How widespread is the problem?

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration reports that **almost HALF of all Americans** age 12 or older have used an illicit drug at some point within their lifetime. Moreover, **1 out of every 9** have used an illegal drug within the past **30 days**.

At the same time, drug overdose deaths continue to climb, with every year setting a dubious new record. In **2017**, there were an estimated **74,000 drug fatalities** in this country. To give that number some perspective, in **2014**, there were "only" a little over **47,000**.

From the Stages of Addiction, we can gain a better understanding of how the problem develops.

Stage #1 – Experimentation

According to the National Institute on Drug Abuse, initiation of drug use – experimentation – is most common during adolescence and young adulthood. By the time the typical US teen is a **high school senior**:

20% will have used a prescription non-medically

40% will have smoked cigarettes

50% will have used an illicit drug

70% will have used alcohol

This is particularly important, because young people's brains continue to mature into the early 20s. This means they are more vulnerable to the changes in brain chemistry and physiology that drive worsening addiction.

Case in point – a person who **started drinking before age 15** is **6 times more likely** to have a drinking problem at some point than another person who **waited until 21**.

Stage #2 – Regular Recreational Substance Use

A statistically-significant portion of people who TRY a substance will progress occasional or even regular use:

Alcohol:

Experimentation – 86% at some point in their lifetime

Occasional Use – 70% within the past year

Regular Use – 56% within the past month

Marijuana:

Experimentation – Over 50%

Occasional Use – 22%

Regular use – 14%

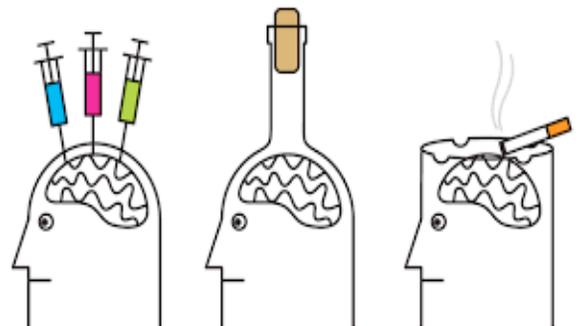
Addiction? – Over 3% of US adults use marijuana DAILY

Other Illicit Drugs:

Experimentation – Nearly 49%

Occasional Use – 18%

Regular Use – Almost 11%



(over)

Stage #3 – Problematic Substance Abuse

Regular use tends to escalate – increased consumption, greater frequency, and most importantly, worsening consequences:

Relationship issues
Problems at work or school
Legal difficulties

Health concerns
Financial strain
Criminal activity

Stage #4 – Tolerance

At some point during the earlier Stages, the alcohol/drug user will notice the need for increasing amounts in order to enjoy the same pleasurable effects. In other words, they have to use and drink more than they used to.

This is because chronic substance abuse artificially overstimulates the reward pathways of the brain, causing them to become exhausted and less efficient. To compensate, they have to keep upping the dosage, just to reach the same level of intoxication. They have developed a tolerance to their substance of choice.

But here's where it gets dangerous – the tolerance for intoxication increases much more rapidly than the tolerance for overdose. To clarify, simply because the person needs to consume more of the drug to get high does NOT mean that their body can safely handle that amount. Chasing diminishing highs often leads to overdose.

Stage #5 – Dependence

As the person's tolerance continues to grow and the "reward burnout" spreads, the brain responds by shutting down the natural production of the neurotransmitters involved. This means that a drug-dependent person loses the ability to experience ANY pleasure whatsoever unless they are under the artificial influence of intoxicants.

This explains why drug addicts lose interest in other interests – hobbies, social activities, food, or even sex – because they can't enjoy them.

Soon, they lose the ability to function at all when the alcohol or drugs are not in their systems. In fact, whenever their drug of choice isn't available, a drug-dependent person may go into withdrawal.

Withdrawal is a set of harshly-unpleasant – and sometimes dangerous – mental and physical symptoms that result when the body goes into "shock" because the accustomed substance isn't available. The pain and discomfort of withdrawal is often what pushes a person into relapsing.

Stage #6 – Addiction

The final stage is addiction – a medically-diagnosable disorder that has identifiable symptoms. According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5), a diagnosis of a Substance Use Disorder is called for when someone exhibits three or more symptoms:

Tolerance

Loss of Control – an inability to choose the frequency or amount of consumption

Failure to Cut Back or Quit

Disproportionate Time Spent Thinking about, Acquiring, Using, or Recovering from Use – an obsession that interferes with everyday life

Abandonment of Other Responsibilities and Interests

Withdrawal

Continued Usage Despite Negative Consequences – For example, a person gets a DUI and continues to drink and drive.