

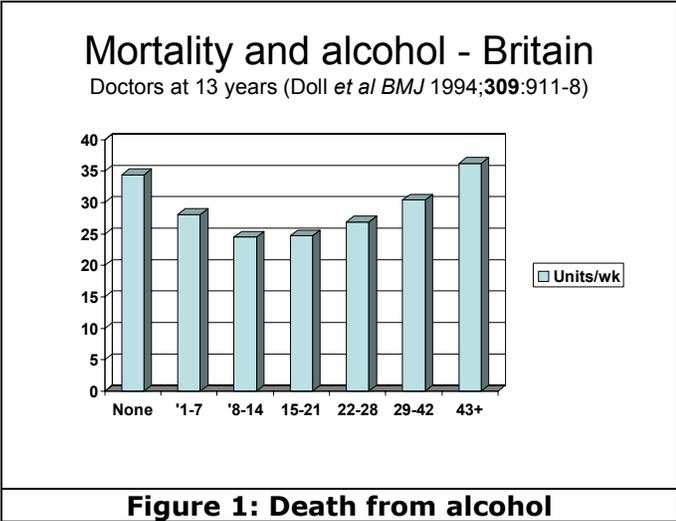
**Why Drug Addiction is an Illness, not a Lifestyle Choice**

There has been much debate about whether addiction to drugs such as tobacco, alcohol, heroin, cocaine and others is an illness or a lifestyle choice.

The features of an illness are

- Death (mortality) and / or
- Discomfort (morbidity)
- A disorder of body structure or function
- External cause for the bodily change

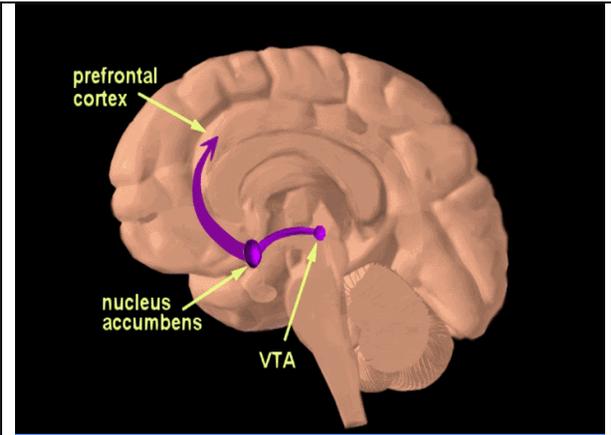
**People die earlier than they otherwise would have done because of drug addiction.** There is much evidence that people who use drugs in an addictive fashion die earlier than they otherwise would (see Figure 1 for the example of alcohol).



**Figure 1: Death from alcohol**

**Drug addiction is an unpleasant bodily experience (ie morbidity).** In the course of addiction, there is much discomfort – low self-esteem, low mood (temporarily relieved by the drug of choice), isolation and social stigma, the worry about getting the next fix, and the unpleasant physical, psychological and social consequences (e.g., withdrawal symptoms; suicidal behaviour; and homelessness respectively) of drug taking.

**Addiction is a disorder of brain function.** Extensive research done in the 1990s has shown that the brains of drug addicts function abnormally. The reward pathways are the part of the brain which act to ensure that we obtain all our daily needs of food, water, sex, and social and emotional interaction (Figure 2). The reward pathways in people who use drugs addictively have been found to be particularly sensitive, indicating that this part of the brain has not been active enough. This is what one would predict would be the case if someone had chronically been deprived of life's necessities.



**Figure 2: The Reward Pathways of the Brain**

Research has shown that all the drugs of abuse act on the reward pathways. It suggests that addiction is a situation in which people use drugs to stimulate the reward pathways to replace what money, love, affection, care and support should have done for them over the previous years.

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Thus addictive drug use is a sign of underlying brain malfunction. Were it not for the fact that all the drugs of abuse also happen to be very toxic, the act of drug taking might well be seen as unimportant.

**External agents cause the brain changes associated with drug addiction.**

There are a number of factors that can prime someone to use drugs or facilitate them doing so. They are listed in Table 1. It can be seen that many are outside the control of the person. Thus addiction is caused by external agency. It is not a 'choice'.

Thus, the addictions are a set of syndromes that are due to the brain changes arising from an abnormal set of external circumstances. Although individuals make a conscious choice to take drug(s), they do so because they are primed to find such choices effective. It is the underlying disorder of the brain functioning that is the illness, not the drug-taking behaviour that demonstrates it to other people.

In drawing such a conclusion, one must not fall into the trap thinking that addiction is the same type of illness as (e.g.) a chest infection. If you are ill, you are excused some of your responsibilities (e.g., you do not have to go to work if you have a temperature), but only those responsibilities impaired by the illness. Only a minority of people with addictive disorders commit significant antisocial acts, implying that antisocial behaviour is not an intrinsic component of addiction.

Therefore, it is a mistake to conclude that someone who has an addictive disorder should be excused the consequences of antisocial behaviour (e.g. going to prison for shoplifting). Addicts need a suitable supply of human goods (food, warmth, love, affection, friendship, inclusion as a contributing member of society) to correct the abnormalities in their brain, supported by the expectation that they play their part ('tough love'). The rest of treatment is aimed at supporting them over many years to allow this process to occur.

Genetic
Congenital
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• mother's use of nicotine, cocaine while the baby is in the womb</li> </ul>
Developmental
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emotional deprivation</li> <li>• Physical and / or sexual abuse</li> </ul>
Environmental
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Family drug use</li> <li>• Low social class / material deprivation</li> <li>• Advertising</li> </ul>
Social disintegration
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of religiosity</li> <li>• Poor social support</li> </ul>
Peer drug use (nb, not peer pressure)
<b>Table 1: Causes of drug addiction</b>