

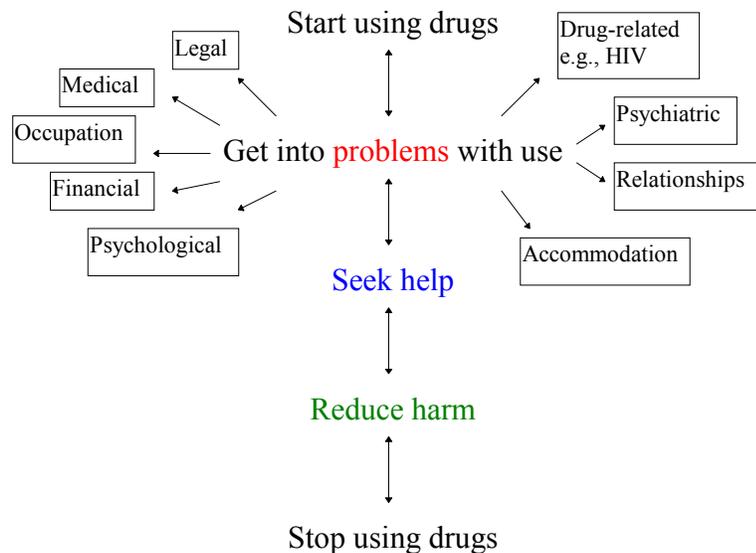
Drug Addiction and its Treatment – A Brief Introduction

Drug use is common throughout the world. Tea and coffee, tobacco and alcohol are enjoyed by many. The valium group and the diamorphine (heroin) group of drugs have medical uses, but the non-medical use of these drugs in other situations is illegal in many countries, along with drugs like cannabis, whose use is illegal throughout most of the world.

People take drugs for many reasons. Primarily, drug taking is a pleasurable experience. People use them alone or in social situations (e.g., champagne at a wedding, business lunches). The pub, whose prime function is to sell alcohol, is often the centre of social life in many villages. Drug use can be part of a lifestyle. And people take drugs to ease distress – a drink to quell the nerves, to settle someone after an argument and the like.

Most people in the UK use legal drugs at some stage in their lives. A significant minority use illicit drugs, particularly cannabis. Most people who use drugs come to no harm and suffer no problems.

But a significant minority suffer problems from using drugs. All drugs have toxic effects, and can kill or cause a large number of illnesses. For example, tobacco use causes heart attacks and cancers; excessive alcohol use causes liver and brain damage; cocaine can cause heart attacks in fit young people; heroin can kill in overdose. And when people inject drugs, they risk infection with life-threatening viruses, such as Hepatitis B & C and HIV.



Schematic representation of the process of entering and leaving addiction

There are also a large number of emotional and social consequences of excessive drug use. People lose their jobs, their homes, their families, their money. They can end up in trouble with the law, when the drugs they are using are illegal, or when they feel that they need drugs so badly that they are willing to commit crime to fund the habit.

People can end up alone, feeling neglected, criticised and stigmatised. For some, it gets so bad that suicide becomes a considered option – an option that some take.

Addiction refers to the situation where a person is experiencing a number of problems from using drugs. It is a medical condition, because the brains of drug addicts have been altered by their previous bad emotions or social experiences. Using drugs corrects the abnormal brain function, but only for a very short time (a matter of minutes to, at most, hours). In the long term, using drugs is not effective in solving the brain disorder.

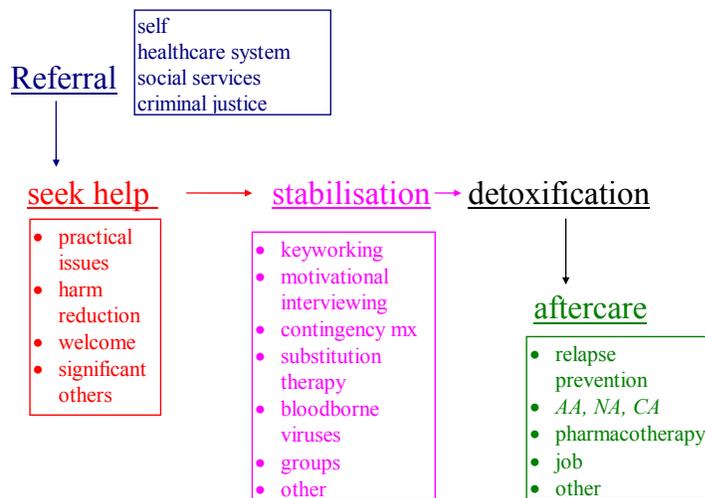
For some people with addiction, the external stresses ease and they stop using. Others are not so fortunate, but need some help. Treatment is available to them, though it is not always easy to find.

What is addiction treatment?

If someone is suffering badly from an addiction, and feels unable to find their own way to a happier life without drugs (a state termed in the addiction world as “recovery”), another person may be able to help.

People with addiction problems are rarely short of family and / or friends telling them that they have problems. Sometimes a comment from such another person is enough to help the person see the way to recovery.

Schema of stages of treatment of drug abuse



But if family and / or friends are as baffled about where to go as the drug user, it may be helpful to have a professional assessing the situation and advising what the options are. There are a wide range of treatments available, as it is possible to help people a several stages of their disorder. There are treatments designed

- to help a person recognise that they have a problem and the extent of it (e.g. motivational interviewing);

- to help a person reduce the complications of their drug use while they make the decision that they want to stop using (e.g., a needle exchange for those who inject their drugs)
- to help a person who wants to come off the drugs safely. Some people eventually use so much alcohol and / or valium-like drugs that they get withdrawal symptoms when they do not use. These symptoms can occasionally be fatal, and so medical assistance is required to help the person through the withdrawal syndrome (referred to as medical detoxification); and
- to help a person stay off the drugs (such as relapse prevention therapy or *Alcoholics Anonymous*).

At each stage, there are treatments that address the drug use (such as relapse prevention therapy, which helps the person look at the situations in which they use drugs and help them handle them differently) and treatments that help the person to look at why they use drugs (for example, counselling to help someone, who is self-medicating with drugs, come to terms with a rape or an assault many years previously).

People with addiction problems may benefit from access to different treatments at different times, depending on the increases and decreases in their drug use, and on the stability or otherwise of their recovery. It may be helpful to take more than one type of treatment at a time. And what may work for one person may not work for another. What is important is to know what treatments are available and to try them out to find out what suits you – more than once if you need to.

How to go about getting treatment

Most people do not know where to start to find help for their drug problem.

You can find more detailed information in our paper *Finding Help for a Problem with Tobacco, Alcohol or Drugs*, which is available from the **drugshelp.info** website.

You can

- Go to a self-help group
- Go to your GP for help with stopping smoking and for referral to local drug treatment agencies
- Go directly to an NHS drug treatment agency, found on the website of your local Primary Care Trust
- Go to a private clinic, a private hospital or a private rehabilitation centre.

Addictive disorders can last for many years. The path to recovery is rarely smooth and people have periods when they are improving and others when they slip back. Any individual treatment episode is likely to contribute to eventual recovery, but may not be the last treatment that the person needs.

You should therefore pause before committing large sums of money to one treatment episode, especially if you are paying for someone else to have treatment.

Individual treatments often address just one aspect of the disorder. A person may therefore have several different types of treatment at the same time, from a number of different agencies.

Ideally, you should have a professional to guide you through the process, but the public system in the UK is tending to make this less possible.

Throughout the process of seeking treatment, you should remember that a significant number of people succeed in recovering from addictions, though you do have to be patient.