Understanding the Connection Between Addiction and Mental Health

by JOHN MENSACK

Addiction and Mental Health

Addiction is a complicated issue that is often hard for outsiders to understand. It is an all-consuming obsession with one substance, activity, or behavior. Your life becomes centered upon whatever this vice may be. Every moment is spent indulging, planning to indulge, or making money to feed your habit. You may lose all sense of right and wrong in pursuit of your habit.

Simply put, an addiction is a dependence upon a particular substance, behavior or activity that is having a detrimental impact on one's life, or that they cannot control. Addiction and mental health often go hand in hand. In this article, we'll review different treatment options, and how to help friends and family who may be struggling.

Types of Addiction

There are three main types of addiction:

- **Legal Substances**: Legal addictive substances include cigarettes, cold medication, and diet pills.
- **Illegal Substances**: Illegal addictive substances include narcotic drugs.
- **Behaviors**: Eating, gambling, and sexual activity are examples of types of behaviors that can develop into an addiction.

Signs and Symptoms of Substance Abuse

Individuals suffering from addiction may exhibit a wide array of symptoms. These can include the following:

- Lack of interest in hobbies and/or previously enjoyed activities
- Increased time spent alone and/or with other addicts
- Stark changes in appearance, such as weight
- Out of character behavior that may seem erratic or irrational
- Physical withdrawal when not drinking or using

Risk Factors of Substance Abuse

Risk factors for substance abuse include, but are not limited, to the following:

- Family history of addiction
- Poverty and/or homelessness
- Substance use

Treatment Options

For those suffering from addiction, there are three commonly accepted routes one can take to recovery.

Inpatient Treatment

A residential treatment center with a focus on addiction or addiction and mental health is the most intensive option for addicts. It offers a safe and secure place for individuals to receive both medical and mental health treatment and gain insight into their condition.

Residents will likely stay for 30 days or longer, and your stay may or may not be covered by insurance.

Outpatient Treatment

An Intensive Outpatient Therapy (IOP) program is the next most intensive option for addicts seeking help. These programs run for several hours a day, usually three days a week.
Patients will attend the program each day and receive therapy, medical advice, and psychiatric care. These programs usually last a few weeks but could last longer depending upon your treatment plan.

Your time in IOP will likely be covered by most insurances.

Self-Guided Treatment

For those uninterested in a guided approach to sobriety, there are other options. Groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous, and Gambler's Anonymous offer participants the space to share their experiences amongst people they can trust will understand.

Thousands of individuals across the country participate in these groups, and those that do often swear by them.

Tips to Aid a Friend or Family Member Suffering from Addiction

As the friend or loved one of an individual suffering from addiction, you may feel powerless to help them. While it is true that every addict must face certain aspects of their struggle alone, there is still much you can do to help the person you love.

Your job as a supporter is to do just that: Support your friend or loved one. Here are a few things to consider:

Try Your Best to Understand

You may struggle to understand and rationalize the decisions an addict makes. However, making a real attempt to understand what your friend or loved on is saying could make a huge difference.

Addicts are often not taken seriously in our society, nor are they given a chance to speak up for themselves. Sometimes, listening to them and making your best attempt to understand their perspective can greatly relieve the stress they are suffering from.

Withhold Judgement

You may feel the desire to judge the decisions of your friend or loved one, but it is important to withhold these judgements when interacting with them. Addicts may feel they have done a great deal of wrong to the people in their lives, and they are often quick to retreat when they feel they are being judged.

If your goal is to help your friend or loved one get clean or sober, withhold any judgements you have about their prior behavior and share these feelings with them when they are in a strong enough position personally to make amends for them.

Set Boundaries

When interacting with an addict, one should never let their own well-being suffer as a result. It is important to set boundaries when dealing with your addicted friend or loved one.

For example, you may ask your friend or loved one not to drink or use around you. Hopefully, they respect this boundary and, if they do, you can continue setting boundaries until the relationship suits your own mental health needs.

Encourage, But Do Not Demand, Treatment

You may feel responsible for getting your friend or loved one into treatment. You shouldn't feel this responsibility; it is the addict's responsibility to seek treatment, and it cannot nor should not be forced upon them.

However, you can encourage them to seek treatment and, if you are comfortable with it, even offer to accompany them to a meeting. Getting through the door of your first meeting is the hardest step, so they may feel safer and more at ease with a supporter coming with them.

Resources to Help

- **SAMHSA's National Helpline (1-800-662-4357)**: A free, confidential helpline that you may call for information, a referral, or simply to talk to someone about what is happening. It's helpful for both individuals suffering from addiction and mental health, and their families.
- **Crisis Text Line (Text 741741)**: A free, confidential alternative to SAMHSA's Helpline, for those who would prefer text over voice communication. Text this number and you will be matched with a counselor trained to help you during a crisis.
- **Alcoholics Anonymous**: AA is a fellowship of individuals who recognize and embrace their struggle with alcohol. Meetings are usually held multiple times a day, every day of the week in most locations.
- **Narcotics Anonymous**: NA is a fellowship of individuals who recognize and embrace their struggle with narcotics. Meetings are usually held multiple times a day, every day of the week in most locations.
- **Gamblers Anonymous**: GA is a fellowship of individuals who recognize and embrace their struggle with gambling. Meetings are usually held multiple times a day, every day of the week in most locations.