

Addiction Impact  
By  
William Santoro, MD FASAM DABAM

When people think of a medical illness, their first thought is often about how it affects the body. Pneumonia—what will it do to the lungs? Hypertension—how will it impact the heart? Myocardial infarction or stroke—how will it affect daily functioning? Cancer—how will it alter lifespan? But what about addiction? Unlike most medical conditions, addiction doesn't just impact an individual; it profoundly affects the entire family unit and disrupts relationships as much as it does the body.

Addiction exacerbates a vast array of issues—medical, psychological, psychiatric, social, familial, spiritual, academic, occupational, legal, and financial. It is associated with decreased life expectancy and worsening comorbid conditions, such as mood, anxiety, and psychotic disorders. Patients with addiction and psychiatric illness often struggle with treatment adherence, leading to increased morbidity and mortality.

Perhaps the most devastating consequence of addiction is its impact on family systems, particularly children. Children of parents with substance use disorders are at increased risk for academic difficulties, behavioral challenges, and psychiatric conditions. They are also more likely to develop substance use disorders themselves. Many who die from addiction are adolescents or young adults—some of whom leave behind children who will never fully understand their absence.

To grasp the true weight of addiction's impact, consider Black Balloon Day, observed on March 6. This day, founded by Diane and Lauren Hurley in memory of Greg Tremblay, honors lives lost to drug overdose. It serves as a stark reminder that substance use disorder knows no boundaries—it affects people across all ethnic, religious, and socioeconomic lines. At a Black Balloon Day event in 2023, a young girl participating in an art therapy program for children of parents with addiction reflected on her drawing: "Mom hit me, she punched me, she slapped me. But the very worst thing she did was she died." This single statement captures one of the most tragic outcomes of addiction—premature death.

Addiction is one of the few medical conditions that is entirely preventable. Yet, when unprevented, it inflicts immense suffering on family members. The likelihood of a child developing addiction if a parent has it is higher than the hereditary risk of diabetes. Even when children of addicted parents do not develop substance use disorders themselves, they often experience far more pain and hardship than children of parents with chronic illnesses like diabetes.

Society bears the heavy burden of addiction, from increased motor vehicle accidents and crime to homelessness and the spread of infectious diseases. The economic toll in the United States alone is estimated at hundreds of billions of dollars annually, covering

medical care, lost income, treatment costs, and other indirect consequences. However, the most significant cost is the immeasurable suffering inflicted upon families.

Professionals working in addiction medicine encounter its repercussions in diverse settings—medical, mental health, social services, criminal justice, education, and private practice. Regardless of the field, the need for knowledge in prevention, intervention, treatment, and referral strategies is universal.

Importantly, a diagnosis of addiction does not have to be a death sentence. Evidence-based treatments exist. Medications such as naltrexone, buprenorphine, and methadone are now the standard of care for opioid use disorder, while naltrexone and other FDA-approved medications help treat alcohol use disorder. Off-label treatments are also available for stimulant use disorders. Psychosocial interventions, including Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT), and Eye-Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR), further enhance recovery outcomes. The best results come from a comprehensive approach—combining medication, psychosocial support, peer-based recovery groups, and spiritual engagement.

People often ask about the success of addiction treatments. During a conference, I presented data showing that a particular intervention extended a person's recovery by six months compared to those without treatment. One attendee questioned whether six extra months justified the cost and effort. I wondered if such a question would arise about cancer treatment. My response: six months of recovery could mean a parent attending a child's baseball game, celebrating a birthday, or simply being present. To truly understand the value of those extra months, one would only need to ask the young girl who lost her mother to addiction.

Addiction affects individuals, families, and society in profound ways. Yet, effective, evidence-based interventions exist for prevention, screening, and treatment. Addressing addiction requires interdisciplinary collaboration and communication, and with the right approach, each of us can make a meaningful difference. Whether through medication, therapy, or holistic support, we have the power to change lives. Thank you for your interest in this critical issue.