Read the Warning Signs

Substance Use Disorders

A substance use disorder (sometimes referred to as an addiction) is a medical disorder marked by ongoing use of alcohol and/or other drugs despite a negative impact on emotional and physical health, relationships, school, and other areas of responsibility.

A substance use disorder (SUD) can be considered mild, moderate, or severe, depending on how many symptoms someone experiences. SymptomsFootnote¹ can be both mental and physical:

1. Taking a substance in larger amounts or for longer than intended
2. Wanting to cut down or stop using a substance but not being able to
3. Spending a lot of time getting, using, or recovering from use of a substance
4. Cravings and urges to use the substance
5. Not managing to do what they should at work, home, or school because of substance use
6. Continuing to use, even when it causes problems in relationships
7. Giving up important social, occupational, or recreational activities because of substance use
8. Using substances again and again, even when it puts them in danger
9. Continuing to use, even when they know they have a physical or psychological problem that could have been caused or made worse by the substance
10. Needing more of a substance to get the effect they want (tolerance)
11. Development of withdrawal symptoms, which can be relieved by taking more of the substance

The physical symptoms of withdrawal occur when use of a substance is discontinued, and includes the following:

- Shaking hands

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Resources

- Vomiting
- Insomnia
- Sweating
- Nausea
- Headaches

These symptoms will vary - they might be mild, if the person has a less severe substance use disorder, or they could be life threatening.

It can be challenging to tell if someone has a substance use disorder. Though there are physical symptoms, many people are highly functional — they may hide and manage their disorder well enough that people close to them never know.

There can also be long-term physical side effects associated with substance use disorders, including, but not limited to: nerve damage, cancer, respiratory infections, liver disease, ulcers, and cardiovascular disease. In addition, there can also be a significant cultural and social impact: financial issues, trouble with friends or family, job and school performance, etc.

What factors influence the development of a substance use disorder? A person's genetics, the type of drug(s) being used, peer or social group influences, and environmental stress can all be factors. Footnote 2 A person may begin to use and then continue to use in part due to a conditioned response to life events — say, dealing with stress, a troubled family situation or experiencing social anxiety.

Every case is unique, but below are some possible factors:

- **Social:** Pressure to feel connected and part of a group, the availability of alcohol and other drugs, and use of alcohol and other drugs to socialize.

- **Personal:** Impulse control, low self-esteem, social anxiety, and desire to fit in can increase the likelihood of someone misusing a substance, as can untreated mental illness.
• **Physiological:** Certain genetic factors. For instance, someone who can “hold their liquor,” may have a genetic predisposition for alcoholism.\(^3\) While genetics don’t determine if someone will develop a substance use disorder, people with a history of substance misuse in their family may need to be particularly careful.\(^4\)

A substance use disorder can develop as a result of many things, and it’s important to keep in mind that no single source will cause a SUD. Just because someone isn’t genetically predisposed doesn’t mean they can’t develop a substance use disorder, and vice-versa.

The good news is, regardless of possible risk factors, there are many resources available to someone experiencing a substance use disorder. Many clinical programs are designed to help people recover, and many people do recover, going on to lead happy, healthy, successful lives.

**References**

2. [https://medlineplus.gov/ency/article/001522.htm](https://medlineplus.gov/ency/article/001522.htm)
3. [https://www.healio.com/psychiatry/substance-use-disorders/news/online/%7Bd18e5f7a-5582-4078-8ec1-d952f841c4d2%7D/holding-ones-liquor-may-spell-risk-for-alcohol-problems-later-on](https://www.healio.com/psychiatry/substance-use-disorders/news/online/%7Bd18e5f7a-5582-4078-8ec1-d952f841c4d2%7D/holding-ones-liquor-may-spell-risk-for-alcohol-problems-later-on)

**Recovery**

In 2017 a survey estimated over 19.7 million Americans have a substance use disorder.\(^1\) It is likely you have — or will have — a friend or loved one in recovery. Developing a better understanding of recovery can help you support someone you care about, and also may be useful in your own journey.
The definition of recovery can include abstaining from substance use (or significantly cutting back), being honest with oneself, being confident in your beliefs, and contributing to the health and wellbeing of your community.¹

People in recovery can experience improved health, perform better at work and school, report better relationships, happier lives, and more resilience.² Many people in recovery say their optimism about the future is the best part.³

Everyone has a unique recovery experience. While many think that recovery means rehab, in actuality, recovery is many things — from someone striving to change with the support of friends and family, to going regularly to group therapy, or using activities like art, yoga, or journaling. Recovery often starts with individuals being honest with themselves about the quantity and frequency of their substance use as well as its impact on their lives and those around them. Each individual's road to recovery is different, depending on their personality, their living situation, the people around them, and the substance of concern. There are many decisions that have to be made along the way. Some people will need to detox under medical supervision. Most people will benefit from behavioral therapy, and others will need to learn how to find and accept community support, including 12-Step programs and other recovery groups. Social support, including connecting with others in recovery, is one of the best predictors of success.

What helps someone recover?
Clinicians refer to “recovery capital” as a predictor of recovery. Recovery capital is all of the support the person in recovery can receive, including:

- **Social Networks:** The friends, family and professionals who help with emotional support and therapeutic guidance. A friend network that respects sobriety is one of the most critical pieces of someone’s recovery.
- **Material Resources:** Some people have access to money, organizations, medication, or other services that can be helpful — for instance, a stable job, housing, or healthy meals.
• **Cultural Environment:** The social environment that doesn’t encourage or emphasize drinking or other drug use will help the person recover.

• **Personality:** Things like an individual’s drive and ambition, their knowledge of the recovery process, access to education, and their mental health status will affect their recovery.

Not all of these things are necessary for recovery. If a person has enough recovery capital from any of these categories, they’re more likely to succeed. Recovery capital can also be increased — for instance, a person in recovery can seek out groups that support sobriety and find supportive friendships. Access to treatment also helps increase recovery capital.

If you or someone you care about are managing recovery, think about recovery capital and how you can increase it. Resources such as clinics and support groups are an amazing way to maximize recovery capital.

**How can I support someone in recovery?**

You can be a great resource to people in recovery. There are some things to keep in mind. First of all, try to understand recovery from their perspective. Recovery is often accompanied by shame and strained relationships — sobriety takes great courage, and compassion from family and friends. The more you understand about recovery the more you can provide support.

Here are some things *not* to do:

• **Don’t question their addiction.** This might seem obvious, but many substance abuse disorders are invisible, and the person may appear more functional than they actually are. If someone tells you they’re in recovery, don’t express skepticism.

• **Don’t assume you know how they feel.** Instead, listen closely to what they have to say.

• **Don’t question how long it’s taking.** Recovery is not easy. Remember, everyone’s journey is unique, and that will impact the time it takes.
• **Don’t tell others without permission.** It can be very difficult for someone to share that they are in recovery. Be sensitive to that, and remember it is not your story to tell.

• **Don’t normalize alcohol and drugs.** Help create opportunities to socialize and receive social support that don’t involve using alcohol and other drugs.

Here’s a list of ways to support people in recovery:

• **Make sure the person knows they’re not alone.** Recovery can be very isolating. Make them aware that you’re supportive of their efforts — ask how you might be most helpful.

• **Check in on them.** While it’s not your place to push for information, asking someone how they’re doing in a way to show your support.

• **Understand and support their chosen form(s) of recovery.** Ultimately, the choice of how to recover is up to the person in recovery.

• **Tell them they deserve all the benefits recovery has to offer.** The hard work and shame of recovery can make it challenging to see the potential gain. Remind them that their life is worth it and that things can get better over time.

Remember, by being present in the life of someone in recovery, you’re part of that person’s recovery capital and are doing your part to help them succeed.

Also, keep in mind that you might not know when someone is in recovery — and you should avoid pressuring someone to tell you. It’s important to respect other people’s choices to not drink, and to not question, pressure or shame someone who isn’t drinking.

**References**

1. National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH)

2. Recovery Definitions


5. Long-term recovery outcomes for those with the most severe AOD problems may have more to do with family and community recovery capital than the attributes of individuals or a particular treatment protocol (Bromet & Moos, 1977; Humphreys, Moos, & Cohen, 1997; Mankowski, Humphreys, & Moos, 2001).