



Drug Dependency and Abuse



What are drugs?

A drug is any substance that when taken produces physical or psychological changes in a person. When people hear the term *drug* they often associate it with those substances that are illegal such as cannabis, speed or heroin. The definition of drug however spans to include more commonly used substances such as alcohol, tobacco and caffeine as well as prescription and over the counter medications. This brochure focuses on *recreational* drug dependency rather than medications.



Drugs used can be classified into a number of categories based upon the effects that they have on the human body. Depressants, stimulants, hallucinogens and other drugs are described below.

Depressants

This class of drugs act to slow down the brain and include alcohol and heroin. These drugs are commonly taken to decrease pain or anxiety and produce feelings of sedation and relaxation.

Stimulants

This class of drugs work to speed up the brain and includes such drugs as caffeine, nicotine, cocaine, speed and ice. These drugs are commonly taken to provide person with a "lift" and enhance mood with effects including increased heart rate, attention and muscle tension.



Hallucinogens

This class of drugs alter a person's sensations and perceptions and includes such drugs as LSD, magic mushrooms, mescaline, psilocybin, and DMT. When taken these drugs can either heighten or distort a person's awareness of reality and can result in visual or auditory hallucinations.

Others

Other drugs such as cannabis and ecstasy produce combined effects from some of the drug classes above. Cannabis for example can have a depressive effect however can sometimes produce paranoia and associated hallucinations.



When are drugs considered to be a problem?

For many people, drugs form part of their regular day to day routine. From the daily coffee or cigarette, an aspirin for a headache to a glass of wine in the evening, people use drugs to stimulate themselves, relax or reduce pain.

Although most people are able to use drugs in moderation, for some people drugs become a central part of their life, leading to harmful consequences.

Problems associated with drug use can include intoxication, drug abuse and drug dependence as well as the associated affect this would have on mental health and day to day life. These are detailed further below.

Intoxication

Intoxication really means being drunk, drugged or *messed up* to the point that it is obvious to the individual and others around them. When one is intoxicated, behaviour usually characteristic of the particular drug or drugs that have been used. For example, someone who is *drunk* will appear *drunk* to other people. Someone who has smoked or eaten marijuana will appear stoned. We recognise intoxication as the signs of drug use.

All forms of drug use have the potential to cause harm to the user. People can experience problems just from being intoxicated once. Some of the common negative experiences may include impaired judgement, altered mood, aggressiveness or violence. The worst outcomes are injury and death, but people may damage social connections and behave antisocially, which is unfortunately common.







Drug abuse

Use and abuse can sometimes be different. A good way to differentiate use and abuse is to say that drinking one glass of wine with a meal is alcohol *use*, but drinking a whole bottle is alcohol *abuse*. The main issue is that alcohol can be *used* quite safely in small amounts, whereas arguably most other recreational drugs have no level of *safe use*.

Physical effects may include liver damage, hepatitis or dangerous driving. Mental health can also be affected with the use of drugs contributing to episodes of depression. Furthermore drug use may be significantly interfering with a person's day to day functioning at school, work or home. Those people with drug abuse problems often involve themselves in dangerous situations (such as driving or operating machinery under the influence) and have recurrent drug related financial or legal problems.

Drug Dependence

Drug dependence can also be referred to as addiction. A person is likely to become dependent upon or addicted to a drug after it has been used for an extended period of time. During this time the drug becomes a central part of the person's life and the person finds it difficult to reduce or stop using. Key indicators that a person has a drug dependency include:

-  A strong desire or craving to take the drug
-  Increased difficulty controlling drug use
-  Experience of withdrawal symptoms when drug is stopped or reduced
-  Higher doses of the drug are needed to have the same effect
-  Normal everyday activities are neglected with more time devoted to obtaining and using the drug
-  Drug use continues despite awareness of harmful consequences

Who is affected by drugs?

- ✍ In Australia, 7.7% of the population experience drug related disorders including abuse and dependence (ABS, 1997).
- ✍ The rate of males with both alcohol and other drug dependence is much higher than that of females both within Australia and internationally (ABS, 1997; WHO, 2003).
- ✍ Drug dependencies appear to be much more frequent in the younger population with many people experiencing difficulties before the age of 30.



The causes

There are diverse opinions about what causes addiction. The mechanisms underlying drug use and dependence are best understood from a *biopsychosocial* framework. This theoretical framework emphasises the role of biological, psychological and social factors in the development of drug associated problems. Each of these components is discussed further below.

Biological factors

Studies of twins and adoptive children suggest that there may be an inheritable or genetic component to drug use however the exact way this develops is not yet understood. One possibility is that genetically determined differences exist between individuals in the doses they need to take before they can notice physical effects. The physiological and genetic factors contributing to drug use and dependence are more established with regards to alcohol than other drugs. Therefore more research needs to be conducted with regards to the biological aspects of drug use.

Psychological factors

People often use drugs to help them in some way. These may include increasing pleasure, enhancing self esteem or decreasing emotional or physical pain. For some people drugs can assist in changing how they feel and can be effective in the short term. Therefore it is not surprising that many people with mental illnesses such as depression, anxiety and bipolar disorder also use substances in order to change their mood.



What impact can drugs have on a person's life?

Drug use can have a significant impact on a person's lifestyle with many negative changes occurring as a result. Such changes may include but are not limited to:

- ✍ Increased conflict with family and friends
- ✍ Marital difficulties and breakdowns
- ✍ Withdrawal from social activities and isolation from family and friends
- ✍ Difficulty maintaining personal and professional responsibilities
- ✍ Financial hardship

Social and cultural factors

The environment a person lives in shapes their development and also influences drug use. In particular family and cultural attitudes towards drug use has an important role to play. Through modelling, children learn from their parents and peers what is acceptable behaviour. Research indicates that children of parents that use or abuse drugs are more likely to develop a drug problems themselves in the future. In some groups, clubs or communities, alcohol and other drugs can be seen as a part of belonging or membership.

Other risk factors

In addition to the above factors, research has identified numerous factors that increase the risk that a person will develop a drug related problem (Gowing, Proudfoot, Henry-Edwards & Teeson, 2001). These include:

- Individual disposition characterised by sensation seeking and rebelliousness.
- Academic underachievement and low commitment to education.
- Low socioeconomic status and neighbourhood disorganisation.
- Lack of familial support, inconsistent family discipline and boundaries.
- Traumatic life events including abuse and neglect, death of a family member, being a refugee in combination with inadequate coping skills and social support.

How might drug abuse change over time?

The course of drug use and associated problems is highly variable depending upon the type of drug. Generally however the rates of alcohol and drug dependency decrease with age. Therefore it can be assumed that many men and women either stop or reduce their drug use over time. Some people may be able to conquer their drug dependency on their own; other people may choose to seek outside help and support.

It is important to remember however that drug dependency is considered to be a chronic and relapsing condition that can last for years. During their road to abstinence or reduction a person may experience periods of heavy use and severe problems followed by periods of total abstinence or non problematic use. Although long lasting changes can occur these are highly contingent upon a person's mental attitude and behavioural commitment.

What does treatment involve?

Treatment for drug use, abuse and dependence involves both physical and psychosocial components. On the physical dimension treatment involves assisting with the physiological adaptations associated with ceasing drug use, more commonly referred to as detoxification or withdrawal. The psychosocial component of treatment complements the physical side in that it focuses upon the underlying reasons for drug use as well as the consequences of a drug using lifestyle. It also places an emphasis on harm minimisation strategies which focus upon reducing some of the risks associated with drug use.

Pharmacological treatments

The medications utilised in the treatment of drug use and dependence varies depending upon the substance being used. Medications have been supported as an effective component of treatment for nicotine, alcohol and opiate use (Gowing et al., 2001). Although reviewing this information is far beyond the scope of this brochure it is appropriate to discuss the various roles of medications in the treatment of drug problems with your doctor.

Alleviation of withdrawal symptoms

Depending upon the type of drug and duration of use, some people may experience withdrawal symptoms when they reduce or stop using a substance. These physical symptoms can be extremely unpleasant and subsequently are a major reason for relapse. For some people, medications may be prescribed to help reduce these physical effects. Whilst some people may be able to tolerate this treatment within the community while supported, others may benefit from the additional observation, safety and assistance provided by an inpatient detoxification clinic.

Substitution of a substance to lower risk of harm

Some people initially find it difficult to stop taking a drug or reduce their use. By substituting a prescription drug that has a similar action but lower degrees of risk, drug users have the opportunity to address the psychosocial aspects associated with their drug use before addressing the physical elements. Therefore the substitute substance allows for the opportunity of a stepped or gradual approach to reducing drug use.

To stop the drug from having a physiological effect on the body

The positive effect of a drug plays a large role in the initiation and continuation of drug use. That is people often continue to use those drugs that make them feel good and produce positive effects. Some prescription medications can actually reduce or block this positive effect thus reducing the possibility that a person will continue to use the original drug as it is no longer achieving the desired effect.

To create an aversive association to assist in drug cessation

Similar to the above rationale, medications can be prescribed that result in an aversive reaction each time the original drug is used. For example, one particular medication works by inducing vomiting each time alcohol is consumed. Over time, the cravings associated with the original drug decrease and instead it becomes associated with aversive consequences thus making the drug itself less attractive.

- If you are currently taking medication it is important that you continue to take the prescribed dose at the appropriate times, on good days and bad days. This medication will help you to prevent future episodes and relapse.
- If you are concerned about medication side effects and wish to change or stop taking your medication it is important that you discuss this with your doctor before taking any action. This is important as some medications must be stopped gradually in order to protect the person from dangerous side effects.

Psychosocial treatments

Cognitive Behaviour Therapy

- Cognitive Behavioural interventions aim to help individuals recognise that they have a problem associated with drug use and to better understand what drives their drug use, how it developed and the personal triggers which continue to maintain the pattern of use.
- CBT assists individuals in identifying and modifying unhelpful thinking styles underlying the drug use.
- CBT also incorporates a skill training component, in which individuals are taught skills to help them to cope appropriately with cravings, how to monitor thoughts related to drugs and drug use as well as monitoring of high risk situations associated with relapse. Individuals are also provided with skills in problem solving, decision making and goal setting in order to produce enduring life changes.
- In some cases exposure may be incorporated into treatment. Exposure encourages the individual to gradually begin to face situations where the person would usually use drugs. At this stage the person is equipped with positive coping skills.
- Relapse prevention is an important part of CBT in which individuals increase their awareness of high risk situations or future obstacles. Based on this information the individual can develop a plan to deal with these events should they arise in the future.

How long will treatment last for?

The length of treatment depends upon a number of factors including the type of substance, duration of use, as well as the level of dependency and the type of treatment itself. Additionally individuals differ in their stage of change and the rate at which they progress through the stages of change. These factors taken together with the fact that drug dependence is considered to be a chronic and relapsing condition, are some reasons why treatments are often lengthy. Research does suggest however, that lower intensity treatments for a longer duration are more effective in the treatment of drug use and dependence (Finney & Moos, 1998).

Expectations for the future

Treatment for drug use and dependency is considered to be just as effective as treatment for any other chronic disorder including those physical illnesses such as asthma and hypertension. Relapse rates for drug dependency have been reported to be 60% over a period of one year (Open Society Institute, 2005). A good treatment response however will largely depend upon the individual level of motivation of the person and their commitment to treatment including medication compliance and behaviour changes as well as their ability to pick up and try again should they lapse.

What can I do to help myself?

- If you have read this brochure and feel that the information in it is relevant to you then it is important that you seek the appropriate help. This can be done by:
- Arranging to see a clinical psychologist at Sentiens where a thorough assessment can be conducted and an individual treatment plan developed.
- Talking to one of the Mental Health Professionals at Sentiens about Sentiens Group Programs that are most suitable for you.
- Organising a consultation with your doctor or psychiatrist.
- You may wish to consider local support groups running in your community where you can meet other people experiencing similar difficulties to yourself.
- Some people find self-help books to be a valuable resource. Self help books can be used in isolation or in combination with another form of treatment. Some self-help resources that are relevant for people with GAD are listed below.

Further reading

Listed below are some books that have been specifically written to help people that are trying to overcome drug abuse and dependency. There are also web resources that provide more information on drugs and drug related problems.

Dorsman, J. (1998). How to quit drugs for good: A complete self-help guide. USA: Prima Publications.

Fanning, P., & O'Neill, J. T. (1996). The addiction workbook: A step by step guide for quitting alcohol and drugs. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger.

Australian Drug Information Network - <http://www.adin.com.au>

References

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Gowing, L., Proudfoot, H., Henry-Edwards, S., & Teeson, M. (2001). The effectiveness of interventions for illicit drug use (ANCD Research Paper). Woden, ACT: Australian National Council on Drugs.

Finney, J. W., & Moos, R. H. (1998). Psychosocial treatments of alcohol use disorders. In P. E., Nathan & J. M., Gorman (eds.). A guide to treatments that work. NY: Oxford University Press.

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