

“Understanding Addiction as a Treatable Disease”

Written by Jillian Goldfine, MEd, LMHC, CASAC

Therapist and Treatment Coordinator, Adult Partial and Intensive Outpatient Programs

Published June 5, 2017

Addiction is a disease - it is a preventable but treatable illness and people can and do recover from it. By definition, a disease is “a disorder of structure or function in a human, animal, or plant, especially one that produces specific signs or symptoms or that affects a specific location and is not simply a direct result of physical injury.” When we think of the word “disease”, images of cancer patients, older people with cardiac issues or adults with diabetes come to mind. It is probably fair to say that, for most of us, the immediate image is not one of an alcoholic or a drug addict. While we would never tell a cancer patient to just stop being sick, many of us do ask a person with an addiction why they can’t just stop drinking, taking drugs or gambling on their own.

Unfortunately many patients and their families have a very difficult time conceptualizing addiction as a disease. Typically, the addict is labeled as a moral failure, a person who lacks willpower, lies and one who engages in criminal behaviors such as stealing.

Extensive scientific research is available showing that when an individual becomes addicted to a substance or behavior, their brains become significantly, and often very negatively, impacted by the use. Addiction is a disease of the brain that translates into abnormal behavior. Much like other mental health diagnoses, these are not necessarily diseases that we can “see.”

Scientists have been able to scan addicted brains as well as identify specific genetic and environmental factors that place a person at a higher risk for developing addiction. For instance, people who have a family history of mental health or substance abuse concerns are more likely to become addicted. Individuals who have had chaotic or traumatic childhoods, who may have experimented with drugs and alcohol in early adolescence are also more likely to become addicted. Over time, tolerance is developed and a person might have symptoms of withdrawal if they stop using abruptly. By the time a person reaches late stage addiction, using no longer feels “good” and substances are abused in order to be able to “function.”

Just like other diseases, once diagnosed, the patient is responsible for taking the steps necessary to manage the illness. The diabetic might need to take insulin and reduce caloric intake. The cancer patient might require radiation or chemotherapy. The cardiac patient may need to take medications such as anticoagulants to manage symptoms. Similar to other conditions, an addict might have flare ups (relapses) and periods of better functioning. It is imperative that a person diagnosed with an addiction gets treatment if they want to get sober.



The person must make healthy lifestyle changes and comply with medical recommendations - sometimes this treatment includes therapy and medication.

The most effective forms of addiction treatment are Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) and Motivation Enhancement Therapy (MET). When participating in CBT the person struggling with addiction becomes able to pinpoint triggers for use and develops skills to prevent relapse. While engaging in MET a person's values are examined and recovery is encouraged not demanded. Additionally, medication assisted treatment can be helpful, but only under the supervision of a responsible physician, psychiatrist or psychiatric nurse practitioner. Many people have found community support groups such as [Alcoholics Anonymous \(AA\)](#) and/or [Narcotics Anonymous \(NA\)](#) to be beneficial. These groups increase a person's sober social support network, providing a like-minded group in which one can share feelings and pursue safe activities.

The take away? People with addiction concerns have a disease, and similar to other diseases, they can and do recover with the right combination of support and treatment services.

Editor's Note: Four Winds Saratoga's Adult Inpatient Services, Adult Partial Hospital and Adult Intensive Outpatient Program all treat individuals struggling with both a psychiatric diagnosis and an addiction (dual diagnosis). At FWS, patients receive education regarding the interaction between their psychiatric symptoms and their addiction. Our treatment focuses on relapse prevention to promote recovery. For more information about our dual diagnosis services, please visit our [webpage](#) or call our Clinical Evaluation Services at 1-800-959-1287.

To Learn More

- "Motivational Enhancement Therapy Manual"
<https://pubs.niaaa.nih.gov/publications/projectmatch/match02.pdf>
- "Motivational Enhancement Therapy and Cognitive Behavioral Therapy Supplement: 7 Sessions of CBT for Adolescent Cannabis Users"
<https://store.samhsa.gov/shin/content/SMA08-3954/SMA08-3954.pdf>
- Harvard Health Publications: "Understanding Addiction: How Addiction Hijacks the Brain"
<https://www.helpguide.org/harvard/how-addiction-hijacks-the-brain.htm>
- Help for Families with Addiction
<https://www.addictionsandrecovery.org/families-and-addiction.htm>
- NIH: National Institute on Drug Abuse: "[Drugs, Brains, and Behavior: The Science of Addiction](#)"
- [Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration \(SAMHSA\)](#)
SAMHSA's mission is to reduce the impact of substance abuse and mental illness on America's communities. This agency publishes many useful guides for professionals and consumers.

