

Chapter 1

Addiction 101: The Making of an Addict

It is estimated that 1 in 12 Americans over the age of 12 are addicted to drugs. Drug prevention programs ought to be targeting middle schoolers and elementary students, not just teenagers. By the time a child reaches 14, it's often too late. By 18, three out of four children have tried drugs.

Parents, though, like to believe that only children subjected to terrible home lives and poverty succumb to addiction, but that just isn't true. Addiction is a disease, and it does not discriminate. A middle class child can come across these dangerous substances just as easily as an abused child living well below the poverty line. If you have a suspicion that your child is using, one of the best ways to confirm or deny that suspicion is to take the time to understand what addiction is. In peeling back the layers of addiction, you will find patterns and signs that are common to all substance abusers because they are connected to the very nature of addiction.

If you have already caught your child using, the need to understand addiction is even stronger. If you want to free your child from addiction's grip, you must understand the beast you're fighting. You must also understand what your child is going through in order to make the necessary connection with your son or daughter that will allow you to convince him or her to seek out treatment.

So without further ado, let's examine what addiction actually is.

Addiction and the Brain

According to the National Institute on Drug Abuse, addiction is "a chronic relapsing brain disease that is characterized by compulsive drug seeking and use, despite harmful consequences." Addiction is not only a disease, but an epidemic, with experts estimating that one in ten people are addicts. Contrary to the popular belief that's developed over previous years that addiction is a just a selfish choice made by weak, undisciplined losers who could easily decide to stop at any time if they really wanted, science has defined addiction as a disease of the brain. Yes, an addict makes a conscious choice to try drugs, make no mistake about that. However, once true addiction sets in, it actually physically alters the brain's structure and function so that it has an insatiable desire for a specific substance. That desire becomes part of the addict's physical makeup and is extremely hard to deny or overcome.

People are drawn to the effects of drugs because they make the body feel good, and we humans are designed to seek out pleasure. Most illegal drugs trigger the release of dopamine in the brain. This is the neurotransmitter found in the midbrain (the region that controls emotion, motivation, and pleasure) that makes us feel happy. Drugs overload the dopamine circuits and create a sense of euphoria. This is what alters an addict's brain.

See, dopamine is our body's reward system. When you do something good for your body, like exercise, the brain releases dopamine to reward you for good behavior, like giving a dog a treat for doing a trick. This reward system conditions the brain to view the drugs as good, desirable, and even critical. This is what makes addiction a disease. The mind actually begins to scream out and demand more drugs. The mind is a powerful thing that controls a person's every action. The battle against addiction is a battle against the mind. And not the logical mind, either.

In the 1960s, a neuroscientist named Paul MacLean proposed the Triune Brain Theory. This theory stated that the brain was made of three parts: the reptilian brain that guided primitive behaviors, the limbic system that controlled emotion, and the neocortex that controlled logic and reasoning. Now, modern scientists don't really follow this model anymore because it is way too oversimplified to accurately define the brain, but for the purposes of explaining addiction, it works just fine. Addiction triggers the reptilian brain through its dopamine reward system. The reptilian brain is responsible for compulsive behaviors, and because of the overload of dopamine, seeking out drugs becomes a compulsion. Drug use reinforces the reptilian brain, rewards it for compulsive behavior, and essentially makes it the prominent "brain." An addict's neocortex tells him drugs are ruining his life; they've made him lose his job; they've made him lose a great girl. The neocortex begs the addict to see reason and quit. The addict hears the neocortex, but the reptilian brain is louder. It wrestles control away from the neocortex and pushes the addict to pick up the needle or sniff another line.

Drugs mess with MacLean's limbic system as well. Drugs force the brain to produce unnaturally high amounts of dopamine. The brain adapts to the added levels by stopping natural dopamine production. The brain is tricked into thinking that more than enough dopamine has already been produced, but really it just produced all of it in one short burst. After the high wears off, the brain doesn't give the addict any more dopamine boosts. So, that happy feeling entirely goes away once the drugs wear off. If the addict wants to feel that euphoria, he must use again. When the drugs wear off, there's no euphoric or happy feeling. This is what leads to severe mood swings in most addicts.

It also sucks the joy out of things the addict once loved. Things that once brought him joy now seem boring, irrelevant, or even unpleasant because he can no longer get that happy rush from participating in those things because his brain can't produce dopamine on its own. Has your son or daughter lost interest in something he or she once loved?

Eventually the body becomes entirely dependent on the substance to just feel normal. To get that high—the extreme euphoria—the addict must take more and more drugs. This is called building up a tolerance, and it is extremely dangerous because it leads to overdoses and dependence. Eventually, the amount of drugs needed to produce the high will be too much for the body to withstand.

When I first started using cocaine, one or two bumps every now and then was sufficient to keep me happy. But near the end, when things began to get really bad, I had to have an 8-ball (3.5 grams or an eighth of an ounce) in my pocket at all times just to function.

This utter dependence on the drugs for the body to function “normally” is what leads to nasty withdrawal symptoms if an addict tries to quit on his own. It’s like when someone who drinks coffee everyday gets a headache because he skipped a cup, but on a much, much larger scale. The brain has been rewarding the addict for using, and when he stops, his body punishes him.

That is what makes addiction so frightening and so hard to overcome. The addict is fighting his own brain, his own body. It’s a battle with oneself, which is always the hardest sort to win.