

Understanding Addiction

Addiction impacts every part of your life—and can have devastating consequences for you physically, mentally, emotionally, and financially. Addiction not only affects you, but it can also have a lasting impact on your family, friends, and community.

Addiction is defined as the compulsive mental and physical need to use a substance such as alcohol and drugs, even though it is harmful. Simply put, addiction makes it hard to say no even though you know it's not good for you.

This happens because substances like drugs, alcohol, tobacco, and cannabis cause the brain to produce large amounts of a hormone called Dopamine.

Dopamine makes you feel happy. With repeated substance use, your brain stops being able to produce normal amounts of Dopamine on its own.

These changes in the brain's wiring can cause intense cravings making it very difficult to stop using harmful substances. Addiction affects a person's judgment, decision making, learning, memory, and behavior.

Alcoholics Anonymous asks its members to maintain their anonymity when speaking at the public level, so we are concealing Arnold's identity.

"I first started drinking when I was 16. One Friday night, some young ladies came up and said they were going to a CYO dance, and did we want to go? I was afraid. I went to the men's room, and there were some guys in a circle, and they were passing around a flask. I had watched everybody else take a hit and pass it, so I took one, and all of a sudden, this warm feeling went down through my throat, into my chest cavity, and down one leg and back up, and I began to feel at ease. And I came into that men's room unable to dance; when I left, I was Fred Astaire."

For Arnold, this was the start of a years-long struggle with addiction.

The most common types of addiction are alcohol, tobacco, opioids, and stimulants. You can also have a behavioral addiction to gambling.

It is often difficult to tell if you or a loved one is suffering from an addiction. Everyone is different and many people with addiction will try to hide the symptoms or deny there is a problem.

If you think you or a loved one are suffering from addiction, be open and honest about your symptoms so you can get an accurate diagnosis.

You do not have to struggle with your addiction alone. Reach out for support through your primary care provider or other healthcare providers, rehabilitation clinics, individual and group therapy, and support groups like Alcoholics Anonymous.

"Help that person build a network that's going to allow them to get sober. Everybody doesn't need inpatient, but everybody certainly needs the outpatient, where their thinking can be changed."

Addiction is serious. It can affect every aspect of your life. But there is hope. If you think you or a loved one has an addiction, reach out and find the support you need today. Visit alcoholtreatment.niaaa.nih.gov.