

# The Root Cause of Addiction

How to Identify and Address  
Addiction Risk Factors



SILVER RIDGE

A PREMIER PROGRAM BY PYRAMID HEALTHCARE

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## Introduction

Addiction is a highly complex disease that affects thought and behavior and takes a toll on body, mind and spirit. Substance abuse and addiction almost always have underlying causes, and these roots of addiction must be addressed in order to end an addiction for the long-term.

The most common roots of addiction are chronic stress, a history of trauma, mental illness and a family history of addiction. Understanding how these can lead to chronic substance abuse and addiction will help you reduce your risk of becoming addicted. Here, we will discuss addiction and its roots, and we'll look at practical ways in which you can lower your risk of developing an addiction to drugs or alcohol.



Understanding  
Addiction

Addiction is characterized by the inability to stop using drugs or alcohol even though using is causing problems in your life. This compulsive drug use despite negative consequences is the result of changes in brain function and structure that affect your thought patterns and behaviors.

When you use drugs or alcohol, the neurotransmitter dopamine is released in the brain, causing feelings of pleasure. The memory region of the brain records a memory of this feeling. The learning center forms connections between the pleasure, the drug use and the environmental cues that are present during use, which are known as triggers.

Over time, the connection the brain makes between using and the pleasure it produces becomes stronger and may lead to intense cravings. These powerful cravings are produced by the same mechanisms that drive us to eat food and procreate in order to survive. Changes in brain function and structure resulting from addiction affect the way we think and behave.

That's why it's so easy to justify your drug use. It's easy to sink into denial that there even is a problem. It's easy to make excuses for yourself. And it's easy to do things that you would never have done before you became addicted, like be dishonest or steal.



Addiction will grow progressively worse if it's not treated. It will also likely lead to dependence, which occurs when changes in brain function cause the brain to operate more "normally" when drugs or alcohol are present than when they're not.

When you stop using a substance once you've developed a dependence on it, normal brain function will begin to rebound. This causes the onset of withdrawal symptoms, which can range from mild to severe.



A photograph showing a doctor in a white coat with a blue stethoscope around his neck, looking towards a man and a woman. The man is in the background, looking at the doctor. The woman is in the foreground, looking down with a sad expression, her hands resting on her face. The scene is set in a clinical or office environment.

## Substance Abuse

*Is the First Step to Addiction*

Some people argue that addiction is a choice, but science says otherwise. It is true that engaging in substance abuse is a choice—at first. Substance abuse is the act of using drugs or alcohol in a way that causes problems in your life, according to the University of Maryland Medical Center.<sup>1</sup> These problems may involve your relationships, finances or health. They may stem from legal troubles or from taking risks you wouldn't otherwise take, such as having unprotected sex.

### People abuse drugs and alcohol for a variety of reasons:

- To combat boredom
- To relieve stress
- To ease anxiety or depression
- To reduce feelings of isolation or loneliness
- To feel better about themselves
- To reduce the effects of trauma, such as insomnia, nightmares and fear
- To cope with illness, loss and other negative life events
- To cope with general unhappiness stemming from a hated job or a troubled significant relationship



These are the roots of addiction. Addiction almost always involves one or more underlying issues that led to the substance abuse in the first place.

Chronic substance abuse doesn't always lead to addiction. Whether it does or doesn't depends on numerous factors, including genetics, environment, personality and biology.

It's important to note that substance abuse, addiction, and dependence are no longer diagnosed as separate conditions. The latest edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* now combines these into one diagnosis of substance use disorder.

An SUD ranges from mild to severe, depending on how many of the diagnostic criteria are met. A mild SUD indicates substance abuse, which may grow progressively more intense and lead to a worsened SUD. You don't have to be addicted to drugs or alcohol to benefit from professional help, which can help you reduce substance abuse to avoid developing an addiction.





The Most Common  
Roots of Addiction

There are many factors that increase your chances of developing an addiction. Four of the most common roots of addiction are chronic stress, trauma, mental illness and genetics. Addressing these underlying issues is a major focus of treatment for substance abuse and addiction.

## **Chronic Stress**

Stress comes from many areas in our lives. Some stress is good for us, motivating us to get things done and enhancing our focus. Some stress is even enjoyable and exhilarating, like the stress of a roller coaster ride or a haunted house.

But chronic stress is neither healthy nor enjoyable. It can seriously harm your physical and mental health. Chronic stress is the kind of stress that constantly grinds beneath the surface, day after day, year after year. It comes from living in poverty, having a dysfunctional home environment, suffering abuse or feeling trapped in an unhappy marriage or a miserable job.

Many people use drugs or alcohol to cope with chronic stress. But while these may seem to help you relax and forget your troubles, drugs and alcohol actually further reduce your ability to cope with stress. According to a study published in the *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, chronic stress also reduces your ability to control your behaviors, and it increases impulsiveness.<sup>2</sup> These effects of chronic stress contribute to the development of an addiction in people who abuse drugs or alcohol.

If you have chronic stress, take the necessary steps to reduce it. Identify the stressors in your life and do what you can to address them. Engage in activities every day that promote relaxation and reduce levels of the stress hormone cortisol in your blood. Here are four activities that are shown through an enormous body of research to be excellent for reducing stress, both in the short-term and the long-term. They can also improve the way your body responds to stress.

**Meditation.** Daily meditation reduces overall stress and improves the way your brain responds to it. Meditation also improves self-awareness, which can help you stay focused on healthy habits and behaviors.





**Exercise.** Daily exercise lowers your stress hormone levels, releases feel-good brain chemicals and increases your body's ability to fight the negative effects of stress, including muscle tension and elevated blood pressure and heart rate.

**Breathe.** Deep breathing exercises reduce stress hormone levels on the spot, making you feel calmer right away. Whenever you feel particularly stressed, take a few minutes to breathe deeply. Inhale fully and slowly through your nose, and exhale fully and slowly through your mouth. Try to keep your mind focused on the air moving in and out of your body rather than on the things that are causing you stress.

**Engage.** Try to spend time each day engaged in healthy activities you enjoy. Hobbies produce a calm, focused mental state known as flow, which reduces stress and promotes feelings of purpose and well-being. Whether you enjoy jogging or reading, knitting, bowling, gardening or wood carving, engaging in a hobby each day will help reduce overall stress and improve your quality of life.



## Trauma

Trauma, especially when it occurs in childhood, affects your brain in important ways. It heightens activity in the threat-detection centers, which increases feelings of anxiety, fear and vulnerability. It causes the memory systems of the brain to keep memories of the trauma in a short-term loop rather than sending them to long-term storage. This can lead to re-living a traumatic experience over and over again. Trauma can also cause flashbacks and disturbing thoughts that you can't seem to escape.

Trauma leaves you more susceptible to mental illnesses like major depression, anxiety disorders and post-traumatic stress disorder. PTSD is common among trauma survivors. Symptoms of PTSD include insomnia, flashbacks, nightmares, intense anger and anxiety. A study published in the journal *Psychiatric Services* found that 80 percent of women in treatment have been the victim of physical or sexual violence, and 59 percent of them were suffering from PTSD.<sup>3</sup>

Studies show that people with a history of trauma and those with PTSD are likely to self-medicate their unpleasant symptoms with drugs or alcohol. But while these may seem to help initially, they almost always worsen the anxiety, depression and other symptoms. For many, self-medicating will lead to addiction.

If you have a history of trauma that's negatively affecting your life and your sense of well-being, therapy can help. Working through the trauma will help end the intrusive thoughts, nightmares, anxiety, anger and fear. Therapy helps you develop essential coping skills to reduce the stress and negative emotions associated with the trauma. It can remove the perceived need for drugs and alcohol to dampen the effects of the trauma, and it can dramatically improve the quality of your life.

## Mental Illness

Anxiety, depression, eating disorders, PTSD and other mental illnesses are a major factor in developing an addiction. The National Institute on Drug Abuse points out that more than half of all people who abuse drugs or alcohol have a mental disorder.<sup>4</sup> People with a substance addiction are twice as likely as the general population to have a mental illness, and people who have a mental illness are twice as likely as the general population to develop an addiction.

When addiction and mental illness co-occur, it's known as a dual diagnosis or co-occurring disorders. It can be difficult to determine which led to the other. Drugs and alcohol almost always make symptoms of an existing mental illness worse, and they can even cause the onset of a mental illness that didn't exist before.

Many people who have a mental illness use drugs and alcohol as a form of self-medication. Someone may use alcohol to reduce feelings of depression. Another might use marijuana to reduce symptoms of obsessive-compulsive disorder. Someone with an eating disorder may use prescription stimulants and illegal drugs like cocaine or meth to suppress the appetite, or they may use alcohol to reduce feelings of worthlessness.





Treating an addiction that co-occurs with a mental illness requires treating both disorders at the same time, each in the context of the other. Treating just the mental illness won't address the substance abuse, and treating just the addiction won't address the mental illness, which is an important underlying cause of the substance abuse.

If you suffer from anxiety, depression, PTSD, OCD, an eating disorder or another mental illness, professional help can restore your mental health. Medication combined with behavioral therapy can dramatically improve symptoms of mental illness that ruin your sense of well-being and greatly reduce the quality of your life. Medication helps

to restore balance among brain chemicals to reduce anxiety, depression, compulsive thoughts and behaviors and other troubling symptoms. Therapy helps you re-train your brain to think in positive, healthy ways. It helps you develop essential coping skills to deal with negative emotions and reduce stress, anxiety and feelings of helplessness and hopelessness.

## Genetics

Genetics account for about half of your risk of developing an addiction, according to the National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence.<sup>5</sup> No specific "addiction gene" has been identified, but researchers have found a number of genes that influence your risk of becoming addicted.

But a family history of addiction doesn't necessarily mean that you'll develop one. The other half of your risk involves factors like your environment, your body's biology, your personal experiences with drugs and alcohol, parental influence and your personality.

Still, if you have a family history of addiction and abuse drugs or alcohol yourself, you may be at a higher risk of developing an addiction. A drug counselor or therapist who specializes in addiction can help you assess your risk based on a range of factors. Reducing your substance abuse and developing healthy habits and attitudes surrounding drugs and alcohol can help you avoid addiction.



A woman with blonde hair, wearing a white long-sleeved shirt and light-colored pants, is sitting on a dark grey sofa in a bright, sunlit room. She is holding a white document and a pen, appearing to be in a meeting or a focused work session. The room features large windows with dark frames and heavy curtains, and a modern pendant light hangs from the ceiling. The overall atmosphere is professional and calm.

Are You  
Addicted?



Maybe you use more drugs or alcohol than you feel you should, but you're sure you can quit any time you decide you want to. Maybe a loved one thinks you have a drug or alcohol problem, but you don't agree. Or maybe you're concerned that you've become addicted, but you're not sure.

Knowing where you currently stand in terms of substance abuse and addiction can help you determine whether your use is problematic and whether professional help might be the right course of action to take.

The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* lists 11 criteria for a substance use disorder. Answering two or three in the affirmative indicates a mild SUD. If you meet four or five of the criteria, it indicates a moderate SUD. Meeting six or more criteria indicates a severe SUD. To see where you stand, answer each question as honestly as possible.

## In the past 12 months, have you:

- 1 Used drugs or alcohol in larger amounts or for a longer period of time than you meant to?
- 2 Found that you were unable to cut down or quit using even though you tried?
- 3 Spent a great deal of time seeking, using, and recovering from using drugs or alcohol?
- 4 Had powerful cravings for drugs or alcohol?
- 5 Repeatedly neglected obligations at home, work or school due to your substance use?
- 6 Kept using drugs or alcohol even though they were causing problems for your relationships, finances, health, or legal status?
- 7 Lost interest in activities you used to enjoy, instead preferring to use drugs or alcohol?
- 8 Taken serious risks while under the influence, such as driving, walking in a dangerous area alone or having unprotected sex?
- 9 Kept using drugs or alcohol even though they were causing physical or mental health problems?
- 10 Found that you needed increasingly larger doses of drugs or alcohol in order to get the desired effects?
- 11 Experienced symptoms of withdrawal when you stopped using drugs or alcohol, or continued to use drugs or alcohol simply to avoid withdrawal symptoms from setting in?

The National Institute on Drug Abuse stresses that good intentions and willpower are rarely enough to stop using drugs or alcohol for the long-term once an addiction has developed.<sup>6</sup> Whether you have a mild, moderate or severe substance use disorder, treatment can help you end your substance abuse and improve your quality of life on all fronts.

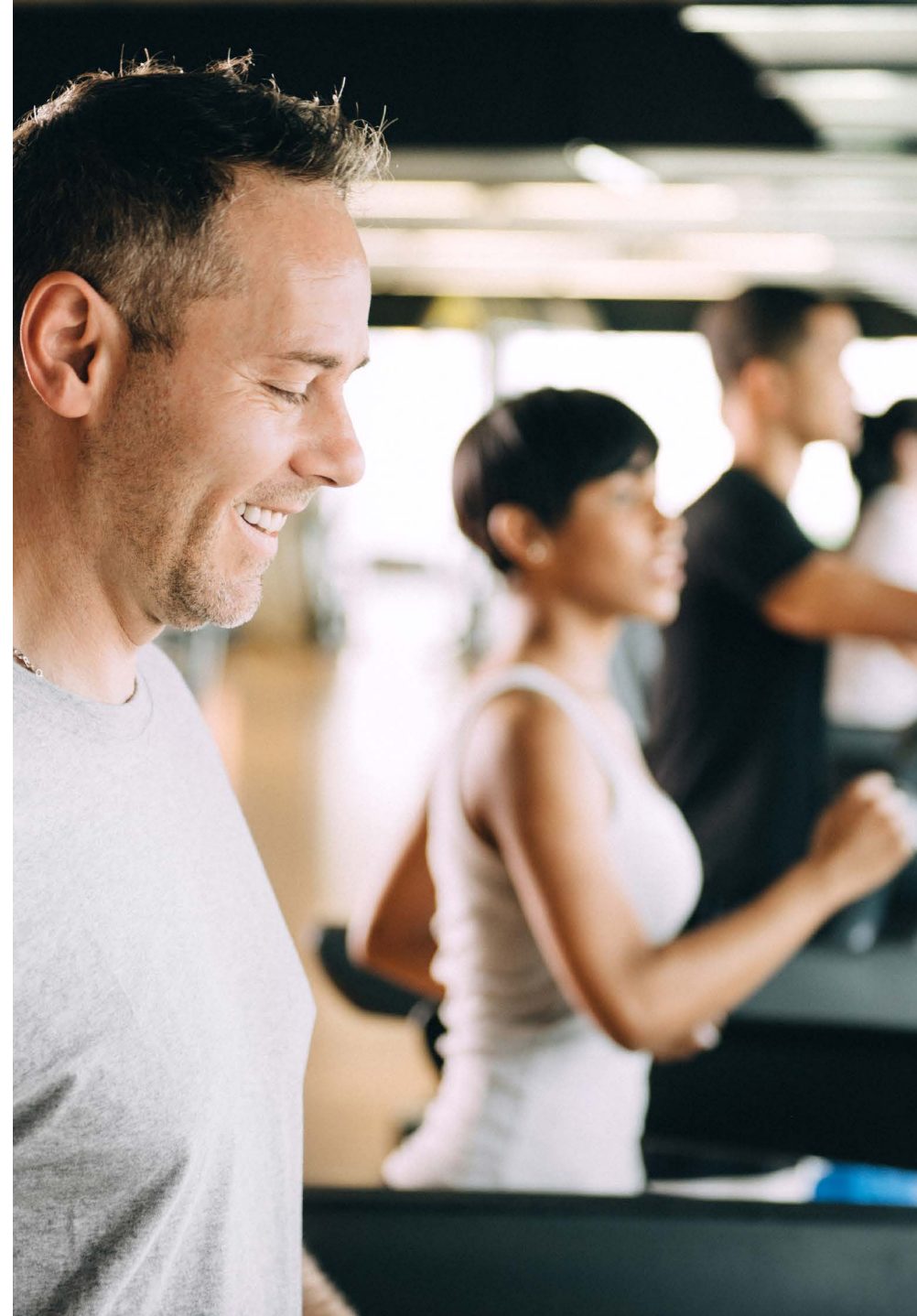


Treatment  
Restores Lives

A high-quality addiction treatment program uses a variety of traditional and complementary therapies to help you end an addiction or reduce problematic substance use. A comprehensive, holistic program will address a range of issues of body, mind and spirit to help you restore your life and your health for the long-term.

**The main focus of treatment is helping you address the roots of your addiction to end the need for substance abuse. Through treatment, you will also:**

- Learn about addiction and how it develops, progresses and is treated
- Identify harmful thought and behavior patterns and learn to think and behave in healthier ways
- Develop coping skills and strategies for dealing with cravings, stress and other triggers
- Restore function to the household and repair damaged relationships through family therapy
- Address a range of issues in your life, including those related to legal or financial problems, educational or vocational needs, mental or physical health issues and spiritual needs
- Improve your self-esteem and level of self-awareness





- Address the stressors in your life and eliminate them or develop skills to cope with them
- Learn to make healthy lifestyle choices that focus on a high level of self-care
- Identify your inherent values, strengths and virtues
- Find purpose and meaning in your life

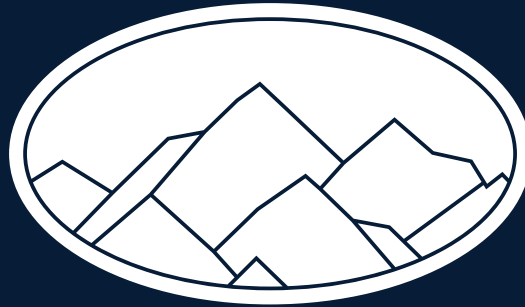
Treatment will not only help you end your substance abuse, but it can also transform your life on many fronts. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration acknowledges that there are numerous pathways to recovery, and a holistic and individualized approach to treatment offers the best possible outcome.<sup>7</sup>

A high-quality program will help to improve your level of happiness, your life satisfaction and your sense of well-being. The sooner you get help for a substance use disorder of any severity, the sooner you can get your life back and embark on a brighter, healthier future.



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Silver Ridge serves established midlife adults who need to retreat discreetly from their daily lives. Here, we provide the perfect setting to focus on the addictions compromising your relationships, your future and your legacy.

**Every great legacy has a strong foundation. Build yours here.**