

Drug use vs drug dependency

(note: for this section alcohol is included in the category of drugs)

Most people who use drugs will never have any need for treatment services.

What contributes to the shift from use to dependency?

Evidence indicates that the drug use is a result of a complex multifactored interaction between repeated exposure to drugs, and biological and environmental factors. It begins in different ways for different individuals and there are countless reasons why people begin to use drugs.

Drug use doesn't solely fall under the category of mental illness, homelessness, or even poor family upbringing. Individuals with high-paying jobs, stable families, and seemingly perfect or sought-after lives can be vulnerable to drug dependencies as well.

Unfortunately, the belief that people who are using drugs dependently are simply making bad choices and that individuals could stop their drug use simply by choosing to pervades across society. In reality drug dependency is complex, and stopping takes more than good intentions or a strong will.

The initial decision to take drugs is voluntary for most people, but repeated drug use can lead to brain changes that challenge a person's self-control and interfere with their ability to resist intense urges to take drugs.

No one factor can predict if a person will become dependent on drugs. A combination of factors influences this. The more risk factors a person has, the greater the chance that taking drugs can lead to dependency. For example:

- **Emotional:** Feeling they need drugs to fill a void in their lives (whether it's stress, trauma, relationship issues or more)
- **Physical:** Feeling like they need the physical effects of a high or low to physically feel better
- **Psychological:** General feelings of inadequacy towards themselves or the world, so they use drugs to boost their confidence and self-esteem and ability to make sense of things

Common factors identified in our services include:

Mental Illness: A complex trigger of drug dependency is mental illness. Some people who face mental health challenges are vulnerable to using drugs as a way of rationalising or making sense of their illness. Others who face depression or anxiety disorders may use drugs to help lift them out of these low mental states.

Self-Medication: When people face physical or emotional pain, they may use drugs to self-medicate. This means they use drugs that aren't prescribed to them by a doctor.

Trauma and Abuse: Past or current traumas such as abuse, accidents, emergencies and other events can negatively impact people psychologically. Traumatic events can imprint in memory, making it difficult to move past them. Even traumas that occurred during childhood can resurface in adult years,

bringing up new thoughts and feelings. Instead of seeking professional help to address trauma in a healthy way, people may use drugs as a means to help them forget these memories.

Present traumas, such as living in an abusive environment, can also trigger drug use as a means of forgetting the pain and suffering.

Isolation: Despite being more connected than ever, many people suffer from feelings of isolation. If they feel as though they can't relate to others or that they aren't understood by their peers, they may feel out of place. These feelings can lead to low self-esteem or even depression over time. This only further exacerbates a state of isolation. In order to numb this loneliness or emptiness, they use drugs to feel alive and forget about feeling isolated. Using drugs may also give them a sense of satisfaction and purpose.