

Understanding Addiction



The reality is that anyone at any age can become addicted. People who are community leaders. People who work in health care. People who work in education. People who are retired. People who are our friends, neighbours, co-workers and our employees.

In many instances these individuals don't fit the stereotypical portrait of an addict. As personal, societal and professional challenges rise, some employees may find themselves demonstrating addictive characteristics tied to several addiction types including substance and behavioural. Often behavioural addictions remain unknown or hidden as they typically do not receive the same profile as a substance addiction.

What is Addiction?

To better understand what addiction is, and when treatment may be needed, it is helpful to understand what constitutes an addiction. According to the World Health Organization, an addiction classification must include three of the following criteria:²

- Tolerance. Does the individual increase use or exposure to the substance or activity?
- Withdrawal. Has the individual experienced physical or emotional withdrawal when they have stopped using the substance or withdrawn from the activity (e.g. anxiety, irritability, shakes, sweats, nausea, vomiting)?
- Limited control. Has the individual sometimes drank or used drugs more than they would like? Do they sometimes drink to get drunk? Does one drink lead to more drinks sometimes? Do they ever regret how much they have used the following day?

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- Negative consequences. Have they continued to use or participate even though there have been negative consequences to their mood, self-esteem, health, job, or relationships?
- Significant time or energy spent. Has the individual spent significant time in obtaining, using, concealing, planning, or recovering from their use? Have they spent a lot of time thinking about using or participating in addictive behaviours? Have they ever concealed or minimized their use? Have they ever thought of schemes to avoid getting caught?
- Desire to cut down. Has the individual thought about controlling their use or limiting their activity? Have they ever made unsuccessful attempts to control their use or limit their activity?

If the answer is yes to three of the above criteria, the person in question may be experiencing addictive behaviours. Realizing the first step is acknowledgement, and recognizing that support is needed in addressing the addiction are courageous beginnings to the recovery journey.

What Kinds Of Addictions Can People Have?

Here is a listing of addictions including but not limited to those listed below. The categories below may be surprising:

- Substance addictions
- Alcohol and drugs (both illicit and prescription) Behavioural addictions
- Eating disorders or food-related Technology/communications and/or internet Gambling
- Working
- Sex and/or social group-related
- Physical attractiveness-focused and/or cosmetic surgery Exercise-related
- Gaming
- Spiritual obsession Shopping
- Risky behaviour and/or thrill/adventure seeking Hoarding

While there is a tendency to naturally associate drugs and alcohol with severe addiction, a scan of these categories shows that there are many unique challenges associated with behavioural addictions. Interestingly enough, some of

the language used today to describe people's behaviours can diminish the severe nature of addiction itself.

For example, you might hear someone speaking of their "shopping addiction" almost playfully in a social setting, as they attempt to make a self-deprecating statement.

In some instances, individuals may use humour to divert attention, or to mask feelings of shame associated with their addiction. It's important to note, that use of humour in these scenarios does not mean the individual has an addiction.

Why Do Addictions Develop?

Addictions arise when people are feeling exceptionally vulnerable. It's important to note that they don't develop overnight, but rather more in terms of a process.³

What Causes Addiction?

There are various causes that can contribute to an individual developing an addiction. The most common reasons often result from:²

- **Family history.** Genetics can predict about 50% of whether an individual will develop an addiction. A study of identical twins, both living together and apart to remove environmental factors, helped to support this theory. When one identical twin was addicted to a substance; the other had a higher probability of being an addict as well. However, when looking at non-identical twins, if one of the non-identical twins was an addict, the other twin did not exhibit a higher likelihood of developing an addiction. Based on the difference between the identical and non-identical twins, the study was able to show that 50 to 60% of addiction is due to genetic factors.^{4,5}
- **Poor coping skills when dealing with stress.** Stress is an important indicator of risk in addictions. Stress can cause those who are moderate users to migrate to a more dependent and constant use of drugs or alcohol. The more stressed you are as an individual, the more likely you are to seek escape or to relax, which is why many people turn to drugs or alcohol. Additionally, when stressed, we tend to do what is familiar and sometimes harmful instead of what is new and healthy. This can cause individuals to relapse to their previous addictions when dealing with stress.⁶

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- **Negative thinking.** All types of negative thinking include a thought process whereby people tend to find the worst in everything, or reduce their expectations by considering the worst possible scenarios. These scenarios can make individuals feel uncomfortable, irritable, stressed, or discontent with life. When thoughts are all-or-nothing, individuals see life and options as either perfect or terrible. Feelings like these encourage escape, relaxation, or reward which may lead to the use of drugs or alcohol or participation in addictive behaviours.
- **Underlying anxiety and/or depression.** Approximately 15 to 30% of individuals with addiction also suffer from underlying anxiety and/or depression. Anxiety and/or depressive disorders can lead to addiction if left untreated. Addictions can also cause an individual to experience anxiety and depression, which perpetuates a cycle of symptoms to addiction and addiction to symptoms. The individual suffering an addiction can be stuck in a repeating sequence of recovery and relapse when experiencing anxious or depressive episodes.^{5,6}

What Are Some Indicators To Watch For That Might Reveal Addictions?

Often, when the condition is revealed, those close to the person wonder how they could have missed the signs. The fact is, addiction is not clear cut, especially if the addicted person intends to keep it secret or is genuinely unaware that they have a problem. While you should pay attention to all behavioural changes, here are four indicators that you may be able to observe in the workplace that could help to reveal mental health disorders and/or addictions:

- **Absenteeism.** Have you noticed a decline in attendance or increasing use of sick leave? Is the employee arriving much later than is customary, or taking prolonged breaks? These may be indications of addictive behaviours.
- **Excuses.** Have you noticed overly elaborate explanations being offered when you check in about completion of projects, tasks or other work related duties.
- **Irresponsibility and recklessness.** Has the employee stopped performing specific time-sensitive aspects of their job functions? Are they making careless mistakes that have significant repercussions?

- **Lack a limitation/filter in social settings.** If the employee is having difficulty regulating themselves in a social or team situation, and those behaviours are not typical of the individual.

Remember, it's important not to assume an employee has an addiction or to diagnosis based your observations.

Addressing Challenges with Your Employees

There are challenges in speaking about mental health or addiction-related difficulties. The stigmas that people face often result in them not talking about their challenges. As a key employee and/or leader, remind yourself of your obligation to help maintain the employee's dignity, privacy and the confidential nature of your observations. Here are some tactics you can implement to provide support:

- 1. Bring awareness to the problem.** Becoming knowledgeable about mental health and addiction is a helpful step when discussing with your team(s). Understanding what creates a supportive workplace that preserves an individual's psychological health, and allows employees to feel comfortable speaking to managers or supervisors about their addiction or mental health challenges can help foster proactive solutions when dealing with these scenarios in the workplace. For leaders and key personnel, reaching out to your Key Person Advice Line for additional support and information may help you better understand unusual employee behaviours.
- 2. Talk to your employees.** It is critical to speak to your employees about mental health and addiction. Continuously speaking about mental health and addiction can help to break down stigma associated with getting help. Acknowledging the stigmas that individuals face, and reinforcing the strength it takes to confront and address one's challenges, can help to create an environment of support.
- 3. Talk to the individual.** If you suspect an employee may be going through a tough time, consider pulling them aside to speak with them. Here are some suggestions you can use in these conversations:⁷

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- Be honest. Let your employee know the signs you have noticed and why you are worried about them
- Offer support. Let the individual know that you are there as a resource for them.
- Encourage openness. Let employees know you are genuinely interested in their well-being. Provide reminders of the resources available to employees, there may be a point where an employee who is struggling begins to seek support, assistance or guidance.
- Don't lecture; listen. The employee may be in a fragile state; therefore, being critical may discourage communication. Listen to what's being shared before asking questions. Take the information seriously.
- Don't be afraid to address the issue. You may be unsure or hesitant about whether the employee has an issue. Even if you are unsure, you should address the concerning changes you have observed that are impacting performance.
- Speak to the individual with dignity and respect. Remember that everyone experiences difficult times. You may feel shocked, angered, sad or scared by what's being shared with you. Remember to remain calm and professional. By treating the employee with respect and dignity, you encourage communication in a calm and supportive environment.
- Seek support. Knowing an employee is going through challenging times can be intimidating and stressful. Where available, reach out to resources for guidance and support on how to address workplace performance. They can help in providing decisions that are in the best interest of employee, employer and workplace.

A better understanding of the signs and symptoms that one experiences when facing mental health and/or addiction-related challenges, may help you in providing the best support for your employees. A great number of people experience or know someone in their life with mental health

and/or addiction challenges. Being conscious of these challenges enables you to become a stronger leader. Realize you are not alone. There are resources available through your company's Employee and Family Assistance Program, as well as community based resources. Help is available.

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