

8 Keys to Overcoming Addiction

ST. JOSEPH
Institute

1. Accept that addiction is a chronic disease that is “cunning, baffling and powerful.”

For generations addiction was understood to be a lack of willpower. Many believed that the addicted person chose to make bad decisions and act selfishly. People thought recovery could be accomplished by forcing addicts to take responsibility for their actions and say “no” to their urges to drink/use.

In recent decades, science has discovered that addiction is a complex disease, influencing brain function on various levels. Biochemical responses and DNA abnormalities are among the many factors that may contribute to addiction. Since these factors impact a person physiologically (body chemistry) and psychologically (mind and emotions), treating addiction is far more involved than simply expecting alcoholics/addicts to take responsibility for their actions and say “no” to urges (see www.drugabuse.gov).

Accepting responsibility is important. However, more is required. The diseased brain of the alcoholic/addict needs time to detox and begin to heal. They need to be educated about the disease of addiction and learn skills to work through the consequences caused by drinking/using, as well as skills to help them live life differently. AA literature describes this disease as being “cunning, baffling and powerful.” Once a person’s brain is altered by addiction, they must remain constantly on guard to avoid relapse.

The addicted person needs to make tough decisions and apply a disciplined effort to break free from using alcohol or drugs. However, this step in their recovery can be very difficult because they have a brain disease that can overwhelm good judgment and “hijack” their will. Recovery demands a constant, dedicated effort to combat a chronic, life-threatening condition.

Addiction is a chronic disease which impairs the mind’s ability to make good choices. Common symptoms are denial, minimization and rationalization.

2. Recognize the signs of addiction.

The line between substance abuse and addiction is often hard to see until it has been crossed. An individual may deny they have an addiction until the consequences are overwhelming and undeniable: a lost job,

broken relationships, a DUI, financial problems, legal issues, or a serious health condition.

The CAGE Test is one way to think about whether you or someone you know has an addiction. (Score 1 point for each yes answer.)

1. Have you ever felt you should **C**ut down your use of drugs or alcohol?
2. Have you ever been **A**nnoyed when people have commented on your use?
3. Have you ever felt **G**uilty or badly about your use?
4. Have you ever used drugs or alcohol to **E**ase withdrawal symptoms, or to avoid feeling low after using?

If you scored 1, there is an 80% chance of addiction.

If you scored 2, there is an 89% chance of addiction.

If you scored 3, there is a 99% chance of addiction

If you scored 4, there is a 100% chance you are addicted to drugs or alcohol.

3. Identify the factors that contribute to your addiction and find solutions.

People drink and use drugs for a reason. They want to feel different. Part of effective addiction treatment requires discovering the unique factors that contributed to each person’s addiction.

There is a reason why alcoholics/addicts start to drink or use. For many of them that reason is hazy when they first enter treatment. As they detox and their brains begin to heal, they are able to make the connection between life events and their pattern of drinking/using. They see that there were underlying contributing factors that caused them to start drinking/using, and often there were additional life events that escalated the problem, causing them to drink/ use more. Often they realize that they used their drug of choice to self-medicate and relieve pain.

On a physical level we find that some alcoholics/addicts drink/use to combat fatigue or exhaustion that has become a chronic problem, preventing them from doing their job effectively or having enough time to spend with family members. Others suffer from chronic illness or physical pain, and they start to drink/use to cope with their physical symptoms.

They might rationalize this problematic behavior, telling themselves “it’s ok since the medications were prescribed by a doctor.” On a mental level we



Solutions that end addiction

find that some alcoholics/addicts are depressed and they drink or use to help lift their mood. Others struggle with anxiety due to mental anguish. They may be troubled by constant internal conflict or racing thoughts that prevent their minds from resting. They find that drugs quiet their mind, reducing the constant chatter or negative thought patterns or past memories that are intruding into the present moment. Alcohol or drugs might let them experience some peace and quiet during the day, and help them sleep at night.

Repeated use of addictive substances builds tolerance, causing a person to need more and more in order to get the same relief.

Many people struggle on an emotional level because they've never been taught to acknowledge their emotions and manage them in healthy ways. Some people develop a pattern of suppressing them and find that over time the stored emotions have become so vast and intense that they need the help of alcohol or drugs to continue to effectively suppress them. Others drink or use to summon the courage to say or do what needs to be said or done. Some people have suffered from emotional wounding that resulted from divorce, death, abuse or neglect. If they have never dealt successfully with the underlying issues, they may be using alcohol or drugs to bury their emotional pain.

On a spiritual level there may be underlying factors such as: spiritual emptiness resulting from a lack of knowledge about God, religion or spirituality; anger or hostility toward God because of certain life events; or spiritual wounds resulting from a religious experience that presented a distorted view of faith and spirituality. Like other areas of concern, spiritual issues are a source of profound pain and contribute to patterns of drinking/using.

Socially there are underlying factors that contribute to drinking/using. On a social level these factors are often related to shyness, feelings that you don't belong or fit in, or perhaps an intense level of social anxiety. In a social context there may be problems bonding with others or participating in effective communication, or there may be difficulty solving problems, making decisions, or resolving conflicts.

In these situations, people drink/use to self-medicate. Socially, some people become addicted simply because they are curious and naïve, thinking "they'll just experiment with alcohol or drugs" without any appreciation of how powerfully addicting these substances can be. These people may try an addictive substance because of "peer pressure" or a desire to "fit in" or to "be popular." Depending on the drug and the genetic predisposition of the person, they may find themselves rapidly addicted to the euphoric high they experience.

Whatever the underlying issue, it needs to be identified and healed because they exert a powerful force that contributes to patterns of drinking/using. Until they are addressed and cleared, they will cause an alcoholic/addict to continue to drink/use, or to be at risk for relapse.

Addiction is sneaky. It is often described as a sleeping tiger, waiting for the right situation to wake up and push someone toward addiction or relapse.

4. Seek effective treatment at a facility that meets the needs of the alcoholic/addict.

Like any chronic disease, addiction needs to be treated. However, the answers do not lie in quick fixes. Overcoming addiction requires learning the tools, strategies and behaviors that enable someone to manage life without resorting to drugs or alcohol as the easy answer. Help is important, because the addicted person must learn to think, act, and behave differently.

There are many types of treatment, including residential and outpatient programs. Residential treatment has the benefits of keeping alcoholics/addicts in a safe environment away from triggers to drink/use, and away from access to their drug of choice, as well as other addictive substances. Residential treatment has the added benefits of placing an alcoholic/addict in a community with constant monitoring that allows staff to observe and address dysfunctional behavior patterns that are associated with, or reinforce, the addiction.

When the treatment community is healthy, the participants learn the skills they need to grow strong in their recovery.

Research tells us the best results come from an intensive program that helps someone better understand their feelings and find new ways of coping with stress, conflict, anger and emotional issues.

To be thorough and effective, treatment needs to include:

- **Recovery Education** to teach skills that help correct old patterns of stinkin' thinkin', emotional suppression or inappropriate emotional expression, and provide important life skills in areas such as establishing healthy boundaries, managing stress and pain, problem solving and conflict resolution.
- **Individual counseling** to identify and learn to manage co-occurring disorders such as anxiety, depression, bipolar disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, etc. **Group Counseling** to share personal experiences with peers; and learn to appreciate how the beliefs,

thoughts and feelings of others may be similar or different from one's own. **Family Counseling** to educate the family about the disease of addiction and identify ineffective family patterns and begin to develop healthy family dynamics with new ground rules for behavior.

- **12 Step Groups** to increase exposure to those who have struggled with addiction and learned from their personal experience with both failures and successes.
- **Relapse Prevention Groups** to identify triggers to drink or use; and to learn to avoid the behaviors that often lead to relapse.

Recovery also requires the discipline to work on staying clean and sober every day. To succeed in treatment, the addicted person must let go of prideful thinking, and the belief: "I can do it on my own." Success lies in accepting the help and support of others, especially from those who have experience in living a life of recovery. Extensive support is available through the various 12 Step Groups, including AA, NA, Al-Anon, and Celebrate Recovery which is a Christian-based 12 Step Group.

5. Stop "enabling" addiction and reinforcing codependent behavior.

The people who love and care for those with addictions are constantly placed in the difficult position of deciding how to act. Do you challenge the alcoholic/addict to get help? Do you refuse to help them until they decide to seek treatment? Do you withdraw assistance (money, housing, car, etc.) until they take the steps to get clean/sober?

There is often great pressure to "enable" an alcoholic/addict because you fear that they will hurt themselves, lose their job, or become homeless. As hard as it may be, family and friends must practice "tough love" and encourage the addicted person to get the help they desperately need. Enabling their behavior only allows the drug or alcohol addiction to continue, increasing the risk of serious or tragic consequences. Support people can benefit from the help offered by Al-Anon. These meetings are open to the public and designed to help families of alcoholics/addicts who are struggling to find solutions (see www.alanon.alateen.com).

6. Know the signs of relapse and avoid triggers to drink/use.

There is no cure for addiction so the recovering alcoholic or addict must always be on guard against the possibility of relapse. It is very important to know the signs of relapse and take immediate steps to safeguard against temptation. Some of the big triggers are stress, exhaustion, loneliness, boredom, resentments and relationship problems. Addicts need to be constantly aware of their triggers and address their underlying needs by practicing a healthy lifestyle with a focus on self-care, getting counseling, attending 12 Step Groups, etc.

7. Do not assume you are stronger or better than everyone else.

One of the principle causes of relapse is thinking that you don't need help; that you can manage recovery on your own. Thought patterns that lead to relapse include: "I understand how to manage my recovery. I don't need a counselor or a sponsor." OR "I am much stronger and wiser now. I don't need any special programs."

Relapse begins the moment a person in recovery thinks they can outsmart their addiction. Remember, alcoholics/addicts are handicapped by an addicted brain which has developed the neurological wiring to respond to a disease that is very clever.

The people who do best in recovery are those who realize their weaknesses. They are willing to ask for help and accept it. They practice surrendering their will in order to rely on the strength offered to them through programs like AA, NA, or Celebrate Recovery – programs that recognize a need for a spiritual solution to addiction by having the humility to depend on a "power greater than ourselves."

*Recovery from addiction does not have any short cuts.
Each day requires a commitment to live a better way.*

8. Remember that recovery is about being proactive.

Life in recovery can have many benefits and positive experiences. The key to staying in recovery is to discover the goodness and the fulfillment life has to offer when you are drug-free. People who are actively engaged in their recovery: Do things to help them manage stress. Work on building and sustaining healthy relationships, especially a relationship with God. Find a worthwhile and fulfilling purpose in life. Clarify and reinforce healthy beliefs, and practice holding on to what is important. Practice healthy self-care, including daily prayer and meditation. Have fun, laugh, play, and enjoy life to its fullest. Show gratitude for all that they are and all that they have.

12-Step programs have helped millions of people around the world. The Steps encourage alcoholics/addicts to admit that they are powerless and need to submit their lives to a Power greater than themselves - a Power that will guide them in making reparation for their mistakes and help them change their lives



Solutions that end addiction.

St. Joseph Institute offers a residential treatment program for adults suffering from addiction. Our one-on-one counseling, Christian spirituality, holistic approach, passionate desire to see people heal, and belief in the goodness of each individual are among the defining qualities of our program. The Institute's beautiful campus is located on a mountainside near State College in central Pennsylvania.

888-777-1098 StJosephInstitute.com