



Recognizing Signs of Addiction

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NORTHSTAR COMPASS

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Addiction to alcohol and other drugs is often a chronic problem. It is progressive, continuous, and long-term. People who suffer from addiction engage in compulsive behaviors and gradually lose control of their lives. They continue to drink or use drugs, even when they know it will lead to negative consequences. Because addiction happens slowly and over time, most people are unaware of what is happening and unable to recognize the depth of their troubles. Many deny, rationalize, and minimize their addiction, defending themselves against the reality of their situation.

Because of these defenses, many people addicted to alcohol and drugs will not seek treatment on their own. To intervene or help someone who struggles, it is necessary to be familiar with the signs and symptoms of addiction. Please remember that having some of the following signs does not mean your loved one or friend is necessarily using or abusing alcohol or drugs. Many of these symptoms are common to a variety of problems such as depression, anxiety, or recovering from traumatic experiences. Whatever the cause, these signs may still warrant special attention.

BEHAVIORAL SIGNS

- Change in attitude or personality, moods swing from euphoria to depression
- Moodiness, temper outbursts, hostility, irritability, and silliness
- Increase in hobbies or activities that involve drinking or where drinking occurs
- Changes in habits at home such as withdrawal from activities or a loss of interest in relationships, which may include a refusal to eat family meals, participate in celebrations or holidays, or make adjustments to family life.
- Chronic depressed mood frequently accompanies addiction, including apathy, low energy, and low motivation
- Excessive need for privacy, secretive, sneaky, or suspicious behaviors are common
- Lying, deception, being uncommunicative, or giving partial information and changing stories, unwilling to discuss important life matters
- Defensive, blaming, making excuses and exceptions for their behavior
- Decrease in work or school performance
- Change in friends, often without disclosing much information about them
- Lack of self-discipline; inability to follow rules, complete household chores, school assignments, or work-related duties; troubles keeping appointments or commitments
- Anxious behavior; chronic jittery, jerky, or uneven movements; fearful, compulsive, and talkative



PHYSICAL SIGNS

- Change in appearance; sudden gain or loss of weight
- Inability to fall or stay asleep
- Slowed, staggering walk or stumbling
- Poor physical coordination, being clumsy
- Loss of appetite or changes in eating habits
- Fatigue, sluggish, being constantly run down
- Red and bloodshot or watery eyes, change in pupil size
- Frequent use of eye drops and breath mints
- Nausea, vomiting, sweating
- Cold hands, sweaty palms, shaky
- Frequent colds, sore throat, cough
- Chronically inflamed nostrils, runny nose
- Puffy face, blushing
- Speech pattern changes, slurred, faster, or slower speech
- Irregular heartbeat
- Smell of alcohol on breath or clothes
- Possession of drug and alcohol paraphernalia

UNDERSTANDING RELAPSE

Chemically dependent individuals can demonstrate relapse behaviors at any time throughout their recovery process, but are especially prone in the early stages of recovery. The relapse process starts when a person falls into old patterns of thinking, feeling, and behaving. The sooner help is sought, the greater the chance for long-term recovery. As an addict hits bottom and makes the monumental and life-changing choice to seek treatment, motivation is extremely high. "I'll do whatever it takes to keep my family, spouse, home, job, and money." Sometimes, as things improve, motivation slips and becomes, "How little can I do and still get by? Can I go to fewer meetings? Could I drink sometimes?" This change in motivation is often a glaring sign old patterns are right around the corner.

RELAPSE WARNING SIGNS

- Self pity
- Complacent with partial efforts
- Decreased self-care
- Increased denial, rationalization, justification, and minimizing
- Increased excuses and exceptions
- Inability to receive correction or advice from others
- Lack of willingness to be held accountable
- Isolation and avoidance behavior increases
- Setting unrealistic goals, often leading to intense emotional reactions
- Instead of taking responsibility for their own actions, blame is increasingly put on others

SIGNS OF READINESS FOR CHANGE

Many times family members or friends are more interested in and motivated for the alcoholic or addict to change than they are. If confrontation and discussions are met with defensiveness and arguments, pushing harder may not work. Here are some indicators someone is ready to change:

- Decreased resistance and more acceptance of a need for change.
- Decreased discussion about the problem. The focus of dialogue moves from the problem to solutions.
- Resolve. The client may seem more, peaceful, calm, or settled, and may have a tone of tearfulness or resignation.
- Envisioning. The client talks about how life might be after their changes are implemented.
- Change talk. When resistance diminishes, change talk increases. The client may begin to make direct statements about the advantages of changing and indicating optimism about those changes.
- Questions about change, including asking others what to change or how to be different.
- Experimenting. If the client has time between sessions, they may begin experimenting with possible change actions.

(Miller & Rollnick, 2002)

SIGNS & SYMPTOMS OF SUBSTANCE ABUSE IN THE WORKPLACE

- Frequently absent from work for no justifiable reason
- Tardiness and leaving work early
- Long lunches or other unnecessary breaks
- Decreased job performance
- Avoiding supervisor or other coworkers
- Poor personal hygiene and appearance
- Lying
- Rationalizing mistakes
- Blame shifting

SOURCE:

Miller, W.R. & Rollnick, S. (2002). *Motivational Interviewing: Preparing People to Change*. New York: The Guilford Press.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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He is the author of *Journeys* and *Destinations*, two books on co-occurring disorders treatment, and the co-author of *Finding Hope Again: Overcoming Depression* with Dr. Neil T. Anderson.

This information in this publication is not intended as a substitute for professional help or to be used as a diagnostic tool. If you have serious difficulties with anxiety, depression, or other mental health issues, please seek professional help.