



Alcohol and drugs – the tipping point from social use to addiction

A glass of wine with dinner, a beer after work, a cocktail in the sunshine on holiday – alcohol makes an appearance in so many aspects of our lives, as many people believe that it helps with tension, reduces inhibitions and eases social interaction. So it can be easy to forget that, like all drugs, alcohol is addictive, both physically and psychologically. But when is the tipping point of use? When does social use become addiction and abuse?

The “tipping point” is “that particular moment when an idea, trend, or behaviour crosses a threshold, tips, and spreads or becomes ingrained into everyday behaviour. A drinking problem starts when the drinking of alcohol causes adverse effects to the health, work, interpersonal relationships and finances of an individual. Experts suggest that the line between social drinking and dependency is clear; if anyone has expressed concern to you about your drinking pattern, then you have a problem.

Addiction to drugs is similarly a chronic, relapsing brain disease that is characterised by compulsive drug seeking and use, despite harmful consequences. In the same way that alcohol can be used to ease social interaction, many people report that they use drugs to feel good, to do better, to escape from the harsh realities of their personal problems or out of curiosity, “because others are doing it”.

But if drinking and drug use makes people feel good, why does it become a problem? When many people drink socially or first use a drug, they may perceive what seem to be positive effects; they also may believe that they can control their use. However, drugs can quickly take over a person’s life. Alcohol is considered in the same way as drugs because alcohol depresses the central nervous system and can disrupt mental and motor skills as well as damage internal organs.

Over time, if drug use continues and if alcohol use turns into abuse and dependence, other pleasurable activities become less pleasurable, and taking the drug and drinking becomes necessary for the user just to feel “normal”. A person’s ability to exert self-control can later on become seriously impaired; this impairment in self-control is the hallmark of addiction, for both drug use and alcohol dependency.

How can you, as a concerned friend or family member, tell whether someone has crossed the threshold of recreational drug use and social drinking? Look for these symptoms:

- Frequent uncontrolled drinking episodes and drinking until drunk;
- Frequently having more than two drinks a day for men or one drink a day for women or older adults;
- Organising their whole lifestyle around drinking or drug taking;
- Getting into trouble with the law;
- Injuring themselves as a consequence of substance abuse;
- Using alcohol or drugs to decrease anxiety or sadness or escape the problems of daily living;
- Lying about or trying to hide drinking and drug-taking habits;
- Feeling irritable, resentful, or unreasonable when not drinking or high;
- Bloodshot eyes, pupils larger or smaller than usual (drug addicts);
- Deterioration of physical appearance and personal grooming habits;
- Drop in attendance and performance at work or school;
- Unexplained need for money or financial problems – may borrow or steal to satisfy habits;
- Engaging in secretive or suspicious behaviours;
- Periods of unusual hyperactivity, agitation, or unsteadiness;
- Lack of motivation;
- Appears lethargic or “spaced out”.

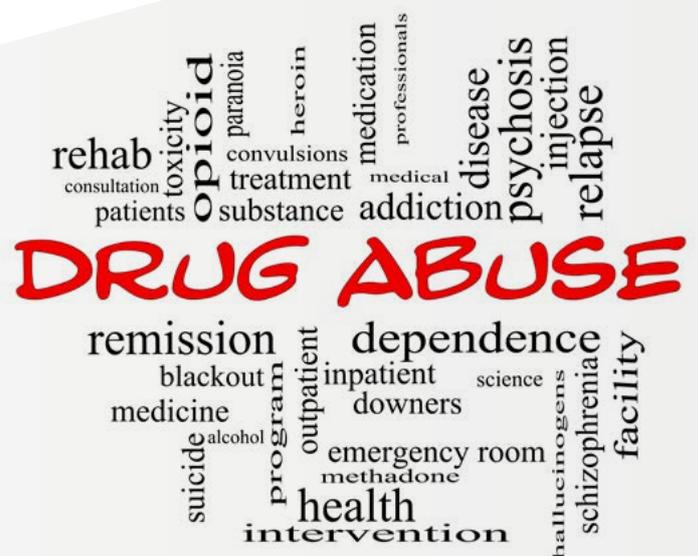
How can people who have a substance abuse problem be helped?

For a person who is struggling with an addiction to alcohol or drugs, becoming sober again can seem like an impossible goal. But recovery is never out of reach, no matter how hopeless the situation seems. Change is possible with the right treatment and support and by addressing the root cause of the addiction. Here are some helpful tips:

1. Decide to make a change.
2. Explore the various treatment options available.
3. Reach out for support – lean on friends and family, build a sober network, join a recovery group and make attending recovery meetings a priority.
4. Learn healthy ways to cope with stress.
5. Keep triggers and cravings in check – support your own efforts to become clean and sober by consciously avoiding people, places and situations that trigger the urge to drink or use.
6. Build a meaningful life free from alcohol abuse and drug use.
7. Search on the internet or in the classifieds for rehabilitation treatment centres that are close to you.

Here are some community resources where you can get help:

- ✓ South African Depression and Anxiety Group (SADAG): 011 234 4837
- ✓ Life Line: 086 322 322
- ✓ Alcoholics Anonymous (AA): 0861 HELP AA (435-722)
- ✓ Narcotics Anonymous (NA): 083 900 69 62



Universal
Employee Wellness