

Recognizing Addictive Behavior

“I Can Stop Anytime.” Facing Up to Addiction

Dave smokes. He says it’s a social habit, not an addiction, and that he could stop anytime.

He’s quit for a few days at a time, but he gets headaches and feels grouchy. So he’s decided he’ll quit for good some time down the road. “I’m young,” he says, “and I don’t even smoke a pack a day. I’ll probably quit when I turn 30.”

Is Dave addicted? Just what does “addiction” mean, anyway?

Simply put, addiction is a chronic urge to repeat a harmful behavior. Addicts tend to:

- Crave more of a substance, drug or behavior
- Build a tolerance to it
- Feel withdrawal symptoms without the substance or behavior (e.g., sweating, stomach problems, severe depression or anxiety)
- Try often to stop, but fail

Quitting: The Challenge

It seems logical that if you can’t quit an addiction on your own, you should seek help. Logical, maybe, but easier said than done. Facing up to one’s addiction and getting help is made harder by addiction’s very nature: An addict is seldom objective. Like the fictional Dave, real addicts often tell friends and family, “I could stop anytime if I wanted to.” They may also deny, minimize or rationalize the harmful effects of their behavior. Someone who is under the influence of drugs or alcohol – or focused on getting the next high – is often unable to make sound decisions or follow through on good intentions.

“You’ve Changed.”

Many addicts have heard this and think the speaker is off the mark. If someone close to you says this, try to take an honest look at yourself:

- Do you think about the substance or behavior often?
- Do you go to great lengths to get it, spending more money than you can afford or more time than you’d spend doing other activities? Are you borrowing money or breaking the law to get it?
- Are you hurting people you love when under the influence? Or by choosing the substance or behavior over them?
- Are you being irresponsible? Is the behavior affecting work or your finances?
- Are you less social? Moody?
- Do you need more of the substance or behavior than you used to in order to get the same effect?
- When you don’t get it soon enough, do you experience withdrawal symptoms?
- Have you tried to quit and failed?

Compare your answers to the definition of addiction. Also consider how your addiction affects your physical and mental health, your relationships with others, and your work, life and financial goals. If you are completely honest with yourself, you usually know deep down if you need help.



Getting Help

Asking someone close to you for support can jumpstart your recovery. But addiction can be very hard to beat. It's key to get professional help as early as possible. Call your toll-free EAP number any time for assessment, assistance and referral to additional services for substance abuse and other emotional health and work-life issues.

What Happens Next

For substance abuse, the first step is to rid your body of the substance. For a mild addiction, you can try to stop using the substance on your own. You can try using a healthy or neutral substitute for the substance or acupuncture to wean yourself off the substance. If you use certain substances heavily, such as alcohol or tranquilizers, quitting on your own can cause great harm. A doctor can give you medicine to make the process safer and more comfortable for you.

For the long haul, behavioral therapy is key. Whether in a 12-step program or another such program, an addict needs to confront the addiction and choose to live without the stimulus. The addict needs to learn about cues and triggers tied to the behavior, how to recognize and avoid them, and what to do when they cannot be avoided.

Cognitive therapy, which helps the addict change thought patterns, is also important and often used with behavioral therapy. It can teach a person, for example, how to get through tough situations without drugs. Or that the addict is a good person instead of someone who deserves harm.

Controlling addiction is a lifelong effort. Behavioral and cognitive therapy can help over the long term. The ongoing support of friends, family and/or support groups can also make a big difference.

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Need help?

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