



Overcoming Drug Addiction

How to Stop Abusing Drugs and Start Recovery



When you're struggling with drug addiction, sobriety can seem like an impossible goal. But recovery is never out of reach, no matter how hopeless your situation seems. Change is possible with the right treatment and support, and by addressing the root cause of your addiction. Don't give up—even if you've tried and failed before. The road to recovery often involves bumps, pitfalls, and setbacks. But by examining the problem and thinking about change, you're already on your way.

Overcoming drug addiction: Decide to make a change

For many people struggling with addiction, the toughest step toward recovery is the very first one: deciding to make a change. It's normal to feel uncertain about whether you're ready to make a change, or if you have what it takes to quit. It's okay if you're torn. Committing to sobriety involves changing many things, including:

- ▶ the way you deal with stress
- ▶ who you allow in your life
- ▶ what you do in your free time
- ▶ how you think about yourself

It's also normal to feel conflicted about giving up your drug of choice, even when you know it's causing problems in your life. Recovery requires time, motivation, and support, and it's okay to consider your situation before you make the commitment to change.

Thinking about change

- ▶ Keep track of your drug use, including when and how much you use. This will give you a better sense of the role the addiction is playing in your life.
- ▶ List the pros and cons of quitting, as well as the costs and benefits of continuing your drug abuse.
- ▶ Consider the things that are important to you, such as your partner, your kids, your pets, your career, or your health. How does your drug use affect those things?
- ▶ Ask someone you trust about their feelings on your drug use.
- ▶ Ask yourself if there's anything preventing you from changing. What could help you make the change?

Preparing for change: 5 key steps to addiction recovery

1. Remind yourself of the reasons you want to change.
2. Think about your past attempts at recovery, if any. What worked? What didn't?
3. Set specific, measurable goals, such as a start date or limits on your drug use.
4. Remove reminders of your addiction from your home, workplace, and other places you frequent.
5. Tell friends and family that you're committing to recovery, and ask for their support.

Explore your treatment options

Once you've committed to recovery, it's time to explore your treatment choices. As you consider the options, keep in mind:

No treatment works for everyone. Everyone's needs are different. Drug addiction treatment should be customized to your unique situation. It's important that you find a program that feels right.

Treatment should address more than just your drug abuse. Addiction affects your whole life, including relationships, career, health, and psychological well-being. Treatment success depends on developing a new way of living and addressing the reasons why you turned to drugs in the first place. For example, your drug dependency may have developed from an inability to manage stress, in which case you'll need to find healthy ways to handle stressful situations.

Commitment and follow-through are key. Drug addiction treatment is not a quick and easy process. In general, the longer and more intense the drug use, the longer and more intense the treatment you'll need. And in all cases, long-term follow-up care is crucial to recovery.

There are many places to turn for help. Not everybody requires medically supervised detox or an extended stint in rehab. The care you need depends on a variety of factors, including your age, drug-use history, medical or psychiatric conditions. In addition to doctors and psychologists, many clergy members, social workers, and counselors offer addiction treatment services.

As you seek help for drug addiction, it's also important to get treatment for any other medical or psychological issues you're experiencing. Your best chance of recovery is through integrated treatment. This means getting [combined mental health and addiction treatment](/articles/addictions/substance-abuse-and-mental-health.htm) from the same treatment provider or team.

Reach out for support



Don't try to go it alone. Whatever treatment approach you choose, having positive influences and a solid support system is essential. The more people you can turn to for encouragement, guidance, and a listening ear, the better your chances for recovery.

Lean on close friends and family. Having the support of friends and family members is an invaluable asset in recovery. If you're reluctant to turn to your loved ones because you've let them down before, consider going to relationship counseling or family therapy.

Build a sober social network. If your previous social life revolved around drugs, you may need to make some new connections. It's important to have sober friends who will support your recovery. Try taking a class, joining a church or a civic group, volunteering, or attending events in your community.

Consider moving into a sober living home. Sober living homes provide a safe, supportive place to live while you're recovering from drug addiction. They are a good option if you don't have a stable home or a drug-free living environment.

Make meetings a priority. [Join a recovery support group](/articles/addictions/self-help-groups-for-drug-addiction.htm) (/articles/addictions/self-help-groups-for-drug-addiction.htm) and attend meetings regularly. Spending time with people who understand exactly what you're going through can be very healing. You can also benefit from the shared experiences of the group members and learn what others have done to stay sober.

Learn healthy ways to cope with stress

After addressing your immediate problems with addiction and starting treatment, you'll still have to face the problems that led to your drug abuse. Did you start using to numb painful emotions, calm yourself after an argument, unwind after a bad day, or forget about your problems? Once you're sober, the negative feelings that you dampened with drugs will resurface. For treatment to be successful, you'll first need to resolve your underlying issues.

Once you have resolved your underlying issues, you will, at times, continue to experience stress, loneliness, frustration, anger, shame, anxiety, and hopelessness. These emotions are all a normal part of life. Finding ways to address these feelings as they arise is an essential component to your treatment and recovery.

Relieving stress without drugs

Drug abuse often stems from misguided attempts to manage stress. Many people turn to alcohol or drugs to unwind and relax after a stressful event, or to cover up painful memories and emotions, but there are [healthier ways to keep your stress level in check](/articles/stress/stress-management.htm) (/articles/stress/stress-management.htm). You can learn to manage your problems without falling back on your addiction. Different [quick stress relief strategies](/articles/stress/quick-stress-relief.htm) (/articles/stress/quick-stress-relief.htm) work better for some people than others. The key is to find the one that works best for you. When you're confident in your ability to quickly de-stress, facing strong feelings isn't as intimidating or overwhelming.

Exercise. A brisk walk around the block can be enough to make a difference. Yoga and meditation are also excellent ways to bust stress and find balance.

Step outside and savor the warm sun and fresh air. Enjoy a beautiful view or landscape.

Play with your dog or cat. Enjoy the relaxing touch of your pet's fur.

Experiment with your sense of smell. Breathe in the scent of fresh flowers or coffee beans, or savor a scent that reminds you of a favorite vacation, such as sunscreen or a seashell.

Close your eyes and picture a peaceful place. Think of a sandy beach, or a fond memory, such as your child's first steps or time spent with friends.

Pamper yourself. Make yourself a steaming cup of tea, give yourself a neck or shoulder massage. Soak in a hot bath or shower.

Keep triggers and cravings in check

Your recovery doesn't end at getting sober. Your brain still needs time to recover and rebuild connections that changed while you were addicted. During this rebuild, drug cravings can be intense. You can support your continued recovery by avoiding people, places, and situations that trigger your urge to use:

Step away from your friends who use. Don't hang out with friends who are still doing drugs. Surround yourself with people who support your sobriety, not those who tempt you to slip back into old, destructive habits.

Avoid bars and clubs. Even if you don't have a problem with alcohol, drinking lowers inhibitions and impairs judgment, which can easily lead to a relapse. Drugs are often readily available and the temptation to use can be overpowering. Also avoid any other environments and situations that you associate with drug use.

Be upfront about your history of drug use when seeking medical treatment. If you need a medical or dental procedure done, be upfront and find a provider who will work with you in either prescribing alternatives or the absolute minimum medication necessary. You should never feel ashamed or humiliated about previous drug use or be denied medication for pain; if that happens, find another provider.

Use caution with prescription drugs. Stay away from prescription drugs with the potential for abuse or use only when necessary and with extreme caution. Drugs with a high abuse potential include painkillers, sleeping pills, and anti-anxiety medication.

Coping with drug cravings

Sometimes craving cannot be avoided, and it is necessary to find a way to cope:

Get involved in a distracting activity. Read, see friends, go to a movie, immerse yourself in a hobby, hike, or exercise. Once you're interested in something else, you'll find the urges go away.

Talk it through. Talk to friends or family members about craving when it occurs. Talking can be very helpful in pinpointing the source of the craving. Also, talking about craving often helps to discharge and relieve the feeling and will help restore honesty in your relationship. Craving is nothing to feel bad about.

Urge surf. Many people try to cope with their urges by toughing it out. But some cravings are too strong to ignore. When this happens, it can be useful to stay with the urge until it passes. This technique is called *urge surfing*. Imagine yourself as a surfer who will ride the wave of your drug craving, staying on top of it until it crests, breaks, and turns into less powerful, foamy surf.

Challenge and change your thoughts. When experiencing a craving, many people have a tendency to remember only the positive effects of the drug and forget the negative consequences. Therefore, you may find it helpful to remind yourself that you really *won't* feel better if you use and that you stand to lose a lot. Sometimes it is helpful to have these consequences listed on a small card that you keep with you.

Adapted from: *The National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism*

Build a meaningful drug-free life

You can support your drug treatment and protect yourself from relapse by having activities and interests that provide meaning to your life. It's important to be involved in things that you enjoy and make you feel needed. When your life is filled with rewarding activities and a sense of purpose, your addiction will lose its appeal.

Pick up a new hobby. Do things that challenge your creativity and spark your imagination—something you've always wanted to try.

Adopt a pet. Yes, pets are a responsibility, but [caring for an animal makes you feel loved and needed](#) (/articles/mental-health/mood-boosting-power-of-dogs.htm). Pets can also get you out of the house for exercise.

Get involved in your community. Replace your addiction with drug-free groups and activities. [Volunteer](#) (/articles/healthy-living/volunteering-and-its-surprising-benefits.htm), become active in your church or faith community, or join a local club or neighborhood group.

Set meaningful goals. Having goals to work toward and something to look forward to can be powerful antidotes to drug addiction. It doesn't matter what the goals are, just that they are important to you.

Look after your health. Regular [exercise](/articles/healthy-living/how-to-start-exercising-and-stick-to-it.htm) (/articles/healthy-living/how-to-start-exercising-and-stick-to-it.htm), [adequate sleep](/articles/sleep/getting-better-sleep.htm) (/articles/sleep/getting-better-sleep.htm), and [healthy eating habits](/articles/healthy-eating/healthy-eating.htm) (/articles/healthy-eating/healthy-eating.htm) help you keep your energy levels up and your stress levels down. The more you can stay healthy and feel good, the easier it will be to stay sober.

Don't let relapse keep you downn

Relapse is a common part of the recovery process from drug addiction. While relapse is frustrating and discouraging, it can be an opportunity to learn from your mistakes, identify additional triggers, and correct your treatment course.

What causes relapse?

Various “triggers” can put people at risk of relapsing into old patterns of substance use. Causes of relapse can differ for each person. Some common ones include:

- negative emotional states (such as anger, sadness, trauma or stress)
- physical discomfort (such as withdrawal symptoms or physical pain)
- positive emotional states (wanting to feel even better)
- testing personal control (“I can have just one drink”)
- strong temptations or urges (cravings to use)
- conflict with others (such as an argument with a spouse or partner)
- social pressures to use (situations where it seems as though everyone else is drinking or using other drugs)
- good times with others (such as having fun with friends or family)

Source: *Centre for Addiction and Mental Health*

The important thing to remember is that relapse doesn't mean treatment failure. Don't give up. Call your sponsor, talk to your therapist, go to a meeting, or schedule an appointment with your doctor. When you're sober again and out of danger, look at what triggered the relapse, what went wrong, and what you could have done differently. You can choose to get back on the path to recovery and use the experience to strengthen your commitment.

[More help for addictions](#)

[Substance Abuse and Mental Health: \(/articles/addictions/substance-abuse-and-mental-health.htm\)](/articles/addictions/substance-abuse-and-mental-health.htm) Substance Abuse Its Relationship to Mental Health Problems

[Drug Abuse and Addiction: \(/articles/addictions/drug-abuse-and-addiction.htm\)](/articles/addictions/drug-abuse-and-addiction.htm) Signs, Symptoms, and Help for Drug Problems and Substance Abuse

[Understanding Addiction: \(/harvard/how-addiction-hijacks-the-brain.htm\)](/harvard/how-addiction-hijacks-the-brain.htm) How Addiction Hijacks the Brain

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