



## Overcoming Drug Addiction

How to Stop Abusing Drugs, Find Treatment, and Begin Recovery



Developing a drug addiction isn't a character flaw or a sign of weakness and it takes more than willpower to overcome the problem. Abusing illegal or certain prescription drugs can create changes in the brain, causing powerful cravings and a compulsion to use that make sobriety seem like an impossible goal. But recovery is never out of reach, no matter how hopeless your situation seems. With the right treatment and support, change is possible. 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 well on your way.

### Overcoming drug addiction: Decide to make a change

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For many people struggling with addiction, the toughest step toward recovery is the very first one: recognizing that you have a problem and 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. If you're addicted to a prescription drug, you may be concerned about how you're going to find an alternate way to treat a medical condition. It's okay to feel 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
- ▶ the prescription and over-the-counter medications you take

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, but by making a commitment to change, you can overcome your addiction and regain control of your life.

### Overcoming addiction step 1: Think 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 use.
- ▶ 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 addiction treatment options

Once you've committed to recovery, it's time to explore your treatment choices. While addiction treatment can vary according to the specific drug, a successful program often includes different elements, such as:

- **Detoxification.** Usually the first step is to purge your body of drugs and manage

withdrawal symptoms.

- **Behavioral counseling.** Individual, group, and/or family [therapy](/articles/mental-health/finding-a-therapist-who-can-help-you-heal.htm) (/articles/mental-health/finding-a-therapist-who-can-help-you-heal.htm) can help you identify the root causes of your drug use, repair your relationships, and learn healthier coping skills.
- **Medication** may be used to manage withdrawal symptoms, prevent relapse, or treat any co-occurring mental health condition such as depression or anxiety.
- **Long-term follow-up** can help to prevent relapse and maintain sobriety. This may include attending regular in-person support groups or online meetings to help keep your recovery on track.

## Types of drug treatment programs

**Residential treatment** – Residential treatment involves living at a facility and getting away from work, school, family, friends, and addiction triggers while undergoing intensive treatment. Residential treatment can last from a few days to several months.

**Day treatment/Partial hospitalization** – Partial hospitalization is for people who require ongoing medical monitoring but wish to still live at home and have a stable living environment. These treatment programs usually meet at a treatment center for 7 to 8 hours during the day, then you return home at night.

**Outpatient treatment** – Not a live-in treatment program, these outpatient programs can be scheduled around work or school. You're treated during the day or evening but don't stay overnight. The major focus is relapse prevention.

**Sober living communities** – Living in a sober house normally follows an intensive treatment program such as residential treatment. You live with other recovering addicts in a safe, supportive, and drug-free environment. Sober living facilities are useful if you have nowhere to go or you're worried that returning home too soon will lead to relapse.

### As you consider the options, keep in mind:

**No treatment works for everyone.** Everyone's needs are different. Whether you have a problem with illegal or prescription drugs, 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 your 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 a desire to manage pain or to cope with stress, in which case you'll need to find a healthier way to relieve pain or 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.

## Find support for your addiction recovery

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Don't try to go it alone—reach out for support. 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](/articles/relationships-communication/making-good-friends.htm) (/articles/relationships-communication/making-good-friends.htm). It's important to have sober friends who will support your recovery. Try taking a class, joining a church or a civic group, [volunteering](/articles/healthy-living/volunteering-and-its-surprising-benefits.htm) (/articles/healthy-living/volunteering-and-its-surprising-benefits.htm), 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 such as a 12-step program 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

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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](/emotional-intelligence-toolkit/index.htm) (/emotional-intelligence-toolkit/index.htm) 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. When you're confident in your ability to quickly de-stress, facing strong feelings isn't as intimidating or overwhelming. 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.

**Movement.** A brisk walk around the block can be enough to relieve stress. 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 drug triggers and cravings in check

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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.** If you were addicted to a prescription drug, such as an opioid painkiller, you may need to talk to your doctor about finding alternate ways to manage pain. Regardless of the drug you experienced problems with, it's important to 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.

**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.

**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. When you ride out the craving, without trying to battle, judge, or ignore it, you'll see that it passes more quickly than you'd think.

#### The three basic steps of urge surfing:

- **Take an inventory of how you experience the craving.** Do this by sitting in a comfortable chair with your feet flat on the floor and your hands in a comfortable position. Take a few deep breaths and focus your attention inward. Allow your attention to wander through your body. Notice where in your body you experience the craving and what the sensations are like. Notice each area where you experience the urge, and tell yourself what you are experiencing. For example, "My craving is in my mouth and nose and in my stomach."
- **Focus on one area where you are experiencing the urge.** Notice the exact

sensations in that area. For example, do you feel hot, cold, tingly, or numb? Are your muscles tense or relaxed? How large an area is involved? Notice the sensations and describe them to yourself. Notice the changes that occur in the sensation. “My mouth feels dry and parched. There is tension in my lips and tongue. I keep swallowing. As I exhale, I can imagine the tingle of using.”

- **Repeat the focusing with each part of your body that experiences the craving.** Describe to yourself the changes that occur in the sensations. Notice how the urge comes and goes. Many people, when they urge surf, notice that after a few minutes the craving has vanished. The purpose of this exercise, however, is not to make the craving go away but to experience the craving in a new way. If you practice urge surfing, you will become familiar with your cravings and learn how to ride them out until they go away naturally.

Source: *The National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism*

## Build a meaningful drug-free life

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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, that make you feel needed, and add meaning to your life. When your life is filled with rewarding activities and a sense of purpose, your addiction will lose its appeal.

**Pick up an old hobby or try a new one.** Do things that challenge your creativity and spark your imagination—something you've always wanted to try. Learn a musical instrument, a foreign language, or try a new sport.

**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.

**Spend time in nature.** Take a scenic hike, go fishing or camping, or enjoy regular walks in a park.

**Enjoy the arts.** Visit a museum, go to a concert or a play, take an art class or write a memoir.

**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 down

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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?

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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 pill”)
- 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 using 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 drug 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.

## Related articles

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(/articles/addictions/substance-abuse-and-mental-health.htm)

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



(/articles/addictions/drug-abuse-and-addiction.htm)

[Drug Abuse and Addiction:](/articles/addictions/drug-abuse-and-addiction.htm) (/articles/addictions/drug-abuse-and-addiction.htm) Recognizing the Signs and Symptoms of Drug Use and Addiction



(/harvard/how-addiction-hijacks-the-brain.htm)

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

***Authors: Melinda Smith, M.A., Lawrence Robinson, Rachael Blackwood, and Jeanne Segal, Ph.D. Last updated: December 2017.***

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