

# Addiction Examined

By Jim Rachels



There are some estimations that have said that up to 35 million people worldwide suffer from addiction issues. Again this is an estimation so it could be even higher than that possibly. And out of these large numbers, only about ten percent actually receive the help they need, and out of those ten percent, only half stay sober. So what exactly is going on in the addiction community that the numbers are so poor?

I believe as of right now we are facing a battle against addiction and we are losing. There is just not enough help and support for people who are facing addiction issues. Many people are punished for being an addict instead of being helped they are thrown in jail. This is the sad state of our society. I believe all of these things contribute to the poor results we have been getting when it comes to someone's sobriety. We need to have more affordable and readily available care for these individuals if we want to improve these numbers. And it needs to be quality care.

Addiction can come in many forms. People can be addicted to drugs, alcohol, sex, gambling, social media, shopping or video games and there are many more things. Addiction also does not discriminate. It can happen to anyone. It does not matter about your creed, color, sex or sexual preference.

So how do we know if we have an addiction problem? It's quite simple. Stop using whatever you think you are addicted to for a period of time and see if you go through any type of withdrawal and most importantly have any cravings taken place.

For quite some time addiction was seen as a defect in character or a weakness of willpower. People just thought someone was using simply for the fact that they wanted to and didn't care what other people thought of them. Many people believed that if the addict truly wanted to stop they could with no problem, all they had to do is want it. This has been shown not to be true.

Through research, through the years it has been shown not to be a weakness in someone's morality and character. Many have come to believe that this is a disease of the brain. I think addiction is just a way to attempt to escape the suffering someone is going through. We are in essence just trying to soothe the pain we are in. So the big questions that people should be asking when it comes to addiction are why you are in pain and how do we treat that pain successfully?

Here is the definition from Wikipedia "Addiction is a neuropsychological disorder characterized by a persistent and intense urge to engage in certain behaviors, often usage of a drug, despite substantial harm and other negative consequences." I think this is something that many of us can identify with.

And something I believe should be mentioned is that almost anything can be addictive. Any activity or substance that releases dopamine in the brain has the potential for abuse. When many people think of addiction they mainly talk about drugs and alcohol. But there are so many more addictions out there. There is the addiction to pornography, gambling, sex, video games and even things like exercise and shopping. These are all things that release dopamine while the person is involved in any of these activities. And addiction can rob a person of who they are and leave them a shell of their former selves.

What happens is the "reward system" in the brain gets hijacked by prolonged exposure to an addictive activity or taking a drug or drinking alcohol. As mentioned before addiction actually rewires our brain. The way the brain is naturally wired is to reward someone when they do an activity that is positive and helps to reinforce beneficial activities. When we eat something, exercise or do something along those lines our brain releases dopamine. This is so we continue to do those beneficial activities to sustain life. But when someone has an addiction issue they are simply looking for a shortcut to get an increased amount of dopamine released. It is said that using a substance to get high can cause a release of dopamine up to ten times stronger than a natural reward would release. So by using a substance or activity your brain floods itself with dopamine and over time this will make the substance or activity much less pleasurable as the brain eventually gets used to this amount of dopamine being released. Then over time, you need more and more of your addiction of choice to get the type of high you are looking for. This then becomes an endless cycle of chasing an unattainable feeling.

One characteristic mentioned in the definition is that we continue with our activity even though it has negative consequences. This can include losing a job, breaking up with a spouse or even being arrested and jailed. Things like this happen all the time and many of us addicts will just continue on with no intention of stopping anytime soon. Many of us get used to these consequences and they stop being a big deal to us.

Many people start off with small amounts of drugs and alcohol or maybe even placing small bets. Over time they develop a tolerance to their addiction and need more of it to achieve the desired effect. This is where the problems start. People will do more and more to get their fix. This is where people run into problems such as employment and relationship issues. This is when people might start to experience cravings and go looking for their addiction at any cost no matter the consequences.

So what is it that actually causes someone to have addiction issues? Some believe this is a disease. They believe it should be treated as such. They

believe it to be a chronic disease the same as diabetes or heart disease. And this can happen to anyone.

Then there are others that believe that this has a lot to do with the environment a child grows up in. It has been shown statistically that people who have childhood trauma are more likely to face addiction issues later on in life.

Through the Addicts Anonymous podcast I have done over 170 interviews. I would say that about 80% of these people have had some type of childhood trauma ranging from verbal, physical and sexual abuse. This has led me to believe that the environment the person grows up in has quite a bit to do with addiction issues they face later on in life. Early in life, the child learns pretty much everything from their parents.

I don't think people truly realize how much of an impact they are having on their children. Everything you do in life influences the way your child will grow up and act. If the parents have any issues such as anxiety they may pass that feeling on to the child giving them a bit of anxiety when being around that parent. This can harm a child's development.

If the parents use drugs and alcohol that increases the chance of that child doing the same thing. When the parents do it a lot it normalizes it for the child. So when the child goes to drink or use drugs it is something that they are familiar with. This of course is only my opinion.

All too often addiction has had a criminal element to it as all drugs are illegal. So these people who were sick were being jailed for the possession of whatever they were using at the time. I think this is something that needs to be further examined. I think we should start treating this solely as a medical issue and not a criminal issue. I believe that this is something that really needs to be examined and make some changes to the way we are currently doing things.

I think a great example of changing the way we do things is what Portugal did quite some time ago and in recent years Oregon has also changed the way they were doing things. What they did was decriminalize all drugs. You no longer go to jail for simply possessing a drug. And what these places have done is taken all the money that they were using to prosecute these drug addicts they are now spending that money on rehabilitation. Some places have even instituted safe injection sites. These are places where addicts can come to use their drugs in a safe environment. There are people there providing clean tools such as needles and spoons. This helps reduce the spread of things like Hepatitis C and HIV/AIDS. This also keeps the addict safe because if they overdose there is someone right there to assist them and keep them alive.

So can we cure ourselves of addiction? The answer to that question is no. But the symptoms we experience because of our addiction can be managed through a few methods. Some things that help are therapy such as Cognitive Behavioral Therapy and group therapy sessions. There is also the option to use medications to assist in your sobriety. This can be anything from medically assisted treatments such as methadone or even medications prescribed by a doctor for various mental health conditions. The reason I bring up mental health is a lot of disorders lead people to use drugs and alcohol as a means to help with their condition and they self-medicate.

Addiction is a complex thing and this is why there is no one answer to the question of what we can do to help our fellow addicts in need. I think the medical community needs to be trained more in these areas as it affects so many people throughout the world. As of now, it is my opinion that addiction is winning the battle. We need much more research being done in this field if we are to try to get a hold on this. I think another huge thing that needs to change is the criminal justice system and the laws surrounding drugs.

I think something else that should be mentioned is the "war on drugs." This is something that is happening all over the world. Unfortunately what this primarily means is that countries all over the world are trying to crack down on addiction and they do that by criminalizing the addicted population. This in my mind only leads to more addicts going to jail and none of them actually address their addiction issues and the moment they leave jail they go right back to where they were before and using the same drugs. This to me seems highly ineffective as it only helps a small percentage of people with addiction issues.

So what is it that we can do in order to recover from our addiction problems? There are many programs out there available to addicts in recovery. There are sober houses, work search programs and work placement programs. Sometimes these can be hard to find but all you have to do is put in the time and research to see which would work best for you. I believe if you have the right amount of determination this is something that can be accomplished.

