

Abuse & Dependency of Alcohol, Tobacco & Other Drugs

Some individuals are at greater risk of becoming abusers.

When a person chooses or is coerced into using alcohol, tobacco and other drugs (ATOD), there are factors within the person (the person's setting, means, resources and the drug itself) that combine to determine the probability of occasional use becoming frequent use, repeated use becoming misuse, and repeated misuse becoming abuse.

The single greatest variable in most cases is family history due to genetic factors. Some drugs possess greater abuse potential. Tobacco (nicotine) is a good example. Few people can smoke tobacco without becoming dependent.

ATOD abuse presents a progression of remarkably predictable and almost universal symptoms and behaviours. Many, if not most, of these symptoms revolve around the concept of **denial**.

Denial

As the dependency / addiction progresses, the abuser becomes more and more preoccupied with drinking / using. The abuser wants to protect their supply, fight off any outside threats to continued use, and defend against the guilt and pain that they have struggled to avoid.

Denial refers to the many ways the abuser has of avoiding coming to terms with the severity of their situation.

The abuser evades, minimizes, obscures, and confuses the facts of their use in ways that are so persuasive and automatic as to suggest that such acts could not have been premeditated.

While it is rare, some ATOD abusers are up front about their use. They appear realistic about the consequences of their abuse and yet declare that they have no desire or intention to quit. Often these are compliant abusers who are trying to fool the world and themselves that they have owned up to reality, made their choice to use, and therefore it is okay to deteriorate with their eyes wide open. This cynicism or rejection of any reason for needing to change is also a form of denial.

Recovery begins when the abuser reaches a moment of truth. As their denial system collapses they experience a sense of hope that they can in fact make a commitment.

Those close to the abuser by virtue of their relationship (family, friend, employer, union, physician, etc) can help the abuser take these initial steps to recovery by adhering to some simple suggestions. By not getting pulled into the abuser's system of denial, they can help the abuser move towards recovery.



Responding To Denial

- **Keep your comments simple.** State the facts and avoid any judgmental words or attitudes.
- **Avoid the use of labels.** The abuser may overreact to words such as alcoholic or addict.
- **Stay on topic.** Do not become distracted.
- **Do not get drawn into arguments.** If you feel intimidated by the abuser, preface your remarks with a polite *Would you like to listen to what I see happening?* While there is no guarantee that the abuser will not blow up, it helps to get them to own some responsibility for the dialogue.
- **State your observations in a factual but caring way.** The abuser often feels defensive and that you are judging them. The abuser needs to see that it is their behaviour, not them, that is your concern.

Codependency

Just as the abuser may deny the severity of their problems, those involved with the abuser can also live in denial of their own problems, pain, and self doubts.

Codependency refers to a style of communicating or relating to others where the individual is so involved with another person's problems that they lose sight of their own needs and goals.

For example, when the spouse of an abuser becomes totally preoccupied with their partner's abuse, the codependent spouse's self-esteem and personal goals are sacrificed. The spouse is convinced that they need to control the abuse and are responsible for the abuser.

Codependent helping does not really help. The abuser who is protected from the consequences of their abuse is thereby enabled to abuse further and their ATOD will become progressively worse. When codependent patterns stop, everyone benefits. As psychologist James Marcia has stated-*It is important to give of oneself, but to beware that you don't give yourself away.*

Breaking Codependent Habits

- **Believe that change is possible.** With each step, you will feel relieved, reassured, and regain self-esteem.
- **Get honest with yourself and one other person.** Stop buying into the denial. There is a problem. Do not keep secrets. It is okay to feel what you feel and to talk about it.
- **Surrender control over other adults (and teens).** They are ultimately out of your control anyway. Reaffirm who owns the problem and your right to take a stand on the behaviours that directly affect you.
- **Set limits for yourself.** Declare how much of yourself you are willing to give.
- **Develop loving detachment.** Be loving and supportive and yet back away from rescuing or bailing out others.
- **Join a support group.** Support groups offer fellowship & encouragement. Everyone learns from each other.
- **Allow for healthy selfishness.** Look after yourself. Enjoy outlets that provide fun and satisfaction.