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Stages of Adolescent Drug Use

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## The Four Stages of Adolescent and Young Adult Drug Use

**Experimentation:** Experimentation is defined as a “one time event.” Once intoxication is experienced, the experiment is over. It is not a phase at all...

**Misuse:** Misuse is characterized as infrequent use for the purpose of intoxication. The misuse’s are those who do not have a pattern of weekend or weekday use, but use on social occasions such as dances, work functions, “Spring Break,” weddings, Super Bowl Sunday, “420,” Halloween, Graduation, New Year’s, Etc. If consequences occur for these individuals because of their drug use, they quit. They don’t try to manipulate drug tests, or lie to cover up their use, they just simply quit. These individuals do not yet have an emotional relationship to intoxication, though they still might experience consequences, such as DUI’s, sexual promiscuity, fights, or even death.

**Substance Abuse:** Substance Abuse is characterized by a pattern of use, such as weekends or during the week. It is defined as using drugs despite negative consequences. Using despite negative consequences is the result of a destructive relationship with intoxication. Moreover, substance abuse is an emotional illness.

The emotional illness of substance abuse has many components:

**1. The drug use circumvents the user from developing their own internal skills to identify, express and cope with emotions.**

This leads to an over reliance on the chemicals to cope with emotions, i.e., boredom, anxiety, stress, depression, etc.

(contd.) This is a part of the reason that so many early in sobriety experience moodiness and report having a hard time dealing with boredom and other emotions.

**2. The drug use distorts the user’s emotions.** We feel pain when we touch a hot stove so that we don’t burn ourselves to death. Pain is a built-in biological safe guard for physical survival. We also have a safe guard for our emotional, psychological, and spiritual survival. If we go out to rob someone, we feel anxiety, guilt and shame. Those feelings are our barometers letting us know that what we are about to do is not healthy for us. However, in the stage of substance abuse and addiction, the user loses that barometer and starts to engage in lying, conning, manipulating, and even stealing with an increasingly carefree attitude.

**3. Values change:** As the relationship to intoxication increases, it becomes more important than work, family, school, straight friends, sports or other activities. And during this process, the user sees the change not because of the use, but because of everyone else i.e., “My wife overreacts...” or “my parents are tripping...”

**4. An emotionally trusting relationship with the drug occurs as a result of 1 –3. The user then protects their relationship to intoxication from any person or system that tries to intervene. They also develop the “I don’t care” attitude.**

## The final stage of use is Addiction

The terms addiction, chemical dependency and alcoholism can all be used interchangeably. The terms simply describe a person's relationship (biological, psychological, and social) to intoxication. If a person is addicted to one drug, then they are addicted to drugs and alcohol altogether. The *name* of the chemical they are using is only an illusion at this point. They use chemicals, period. Whether it is marijuana, alcohol, or heroin that they used last week, it is all the same. It is important to not minimize and say "it is only alcohol." If a person has addiction they need to be abstinent from all chemicals that create intoxication.

### The symptoms of addiction are:

*preoccupation, using despite negative consequences and loss of control.*

**Preoccupation** occurs when the user is preoccupied with getting drugs, paying for drugs, and protecting their relationship to drugs.

**Using despite negative consequences** occurs when a person experiences a consequence from their chemical use and they continue to use.

Finally, **loss of control** occurs when a person sets limits on the amount of chemicals they are going to use, and then they find themselves going beyond that limit. For example, the user might buy a bag of marijuana with the goal of making it last all week, but then find that they have used it all in two days.

The user might go to parties with the goal that they are only going to have 2 beers, but after two beers they are still drinking. That is *loss of control*.

(contd). Primarily, addiction occurs because of biology. Genetics and using at an early age when the brain is still developing are the two biggest predictors for addiction.

**Genetics** is the number one predictor to determine if a person is going to have addiction. This simply means that if a person comes from a biological family history of alcoholism/addiction, then it is possible that they have inherited that gene.

The **age of first intoxication** is the second most reliable predictor to determine if a person is going to have addiction. Drug use during brain growth and development prior to age 18 significantly changes neurotransmission in the brain, which can lead to dependency on drugs.

Finally, in 1956 the American Medical Association classified addiction as a primary disease. They stated that it has symptoms. It is progressive which means that it only gets worse over time, and that it is can be fatal if left untreated.

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