

# What is an Addiction Disorder?

Addiction is a primary **chronic disease** of brain reward, motivation, memory and related circuitry. Dysfunction in these circuits leads to characteristic biological, psychological, social and spiritual manifestations. This is reflected in an individual pathologically pursuing reward and/or relief by substance use and other behaviors.

Addiction is characterized by inability to consistently abstain, impairment in behavioral control, craving, diminished recognition of significant problems with one's behaviors and interpersonal relationships, and a dysfunctional emotional response. Like other chronic diseases, addiction often involves cycles of relapse and remission. Without treatment or engagement in recovery activities, addiction is progressive and can result in disability or premature death.

**Addiction** is often characterized by the “A-B-C-D-E” acronym that stands for:

- a. **Inability to consistently Abstain;**
- b. **Impairment in Behavioral control;**
- c. **Craving; or increased “hunger” for drugs or rewarding experiences;**
- d. **Diminished recognition of significant problems with one's behaviors and interpersonal relationships; and**
- e. **A dysfunctional Emotional response.**

The **power of external cues** to trigger craving and drug use, as well as to increase the frequency of engagement in other potentially addictive behaviors, is also a characteristic of addiction, with the hippocampus being important in memory of previous euphoric or dysphoric experiences, and with the amygdala being important in having motivation concentrate on selecting behaviors associated with these past experiences.

Although some believe that the difference between those who have addiction, and those who do not, is the *quantity or frequency* of alcohol/drug use, engagement in addictive behaviors (such as gambling or spending), or exposure to other external rewards (such as food or sex), a characteristic aspect of addiction is the *qualitative way* in which the individual responds to such exposures, stressors and environmental cues. A particularly pathological aspect of *the way* that persons with addiction pursue substance use or external rewards is that preoccupation with, obsession with and/or pursuit of rewards (e.g., alcohol and other drug use) persist despite the accumulation of adverse consequences. These manifestations can occur compulsively or impulsively, as a reflection of impaired control.