PERTH PSYCHOLOGISTS

What is Addiction?

When most of us think about what causes addictions the things that come to mind tend to be drugs, alcohol, cigarettes, gambling, computer games and pornography, but these are not the causal factors of addiction. Addictions are the things people turn to, to compensate for something else that is affecting their underlying mental health, quality of life and well-being.

The underlying causal factor of addiction is related to a natural desire to avoid pain and seek pleasure. Typically there is something not working in an individual's life and they turn to a particular behaviour to avoid that pain and or create pleasure where it is missing. If it is done enough times and has a level of intensity associated with it, it can build neural pathways or 'thought tracks' in the brain which become increasingly compulsive and hard to break. But they can be interrupted and you can return to previous ways of being.

The primary indicator of an addiction is when there is an impaired or no ability to stop. When a behaviour has reached this level it has a health and safety implication. It can impact relationships, family, employment, and starts to affect an individual's overall quality of life and well-being.

Addiction can be complex, and quitting takes more than good intentions, but with help, self-compassion and persistence a quality of life and well-being free of addiction can be achieved.

Risk Factors for Addiction

No single factor can predict susceptibility to addiction, risk factors are influenced by a combination of things, including:

- **Genetics.** There may be an underlying genetic pre-disposition to certain ways of thinking or behaviours.
- **Environment.** Environmental influences, including family, friends, peer pressure, socioeconomic status, stress, traumatic experiences, and quality of life in general.
- **Development.** The earlier that an addictive behaviour begins, the more likely it can interrupt normal developmental.

How do addictive substances change the brain?

Certain addictions, such as drugs and alcohol actually change the brain. Although the initial decision to commence an addictive behaviour is voluntary, the brain changes that occur over time challenge a person's self-control and ability to resist intense impulses. Addictive substances contain chemicals that tap into the brain's communication system and disrupt the way nerve cells normally send, receive, and process information, by:

- **Imitating the brain's natural chemical messengers.** Drugs, such as marijuana and heroin, have a similar structure to the brains chemical messengers called neurotransmitters. These drugs "fool" the brain's receptors and activate nerve cells to send abnormal messages.
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- **Overstimulating the brain's "reward circuit".** Drugs, such as cocaine and methamphetamine, can cause the release of abnormally large amounts of dopamine or to prevent the normal recycling of dopamine, which controls movement, emotion, motivation, and feelings of pleasure. The overstimulation of this reward system, produces euphoric effects in response setting in motion a reinforcing pattern that "teaches" people to repeat the rewarding behaviour.

Treatment

Overcoming an addiction is not simply a matter of stopping engaging in the addictive behaviour, instead dealing with the underlying factors affecting the mental health, well-being and quality of life of the person plays a significant factor in recovery. Accordingly, treatment plans for addictions can be tailored to each client's addictive patterns and any co-occurring medical, psychological or social challenges in order to achieve sustained recovery, long-term well-being and quality of life.

Treatment plans will commonly include a form of Cognitive and Behavioural Therapy in addition to making healthy lifestyle changes which address the triggers for the unhealthy addictive behaviour.

It is not uncommon for someone to relapse. Relapse, does not signal treatment failure—rather, it indicates that treatment should be reinstated, adjusted, or that an alternative treatment is needed to help the individual regain control and recover and achieve long-term well-being and quality of life.

Phone: 1300 70 50 55 **Email:** support@perthpsychologists.net.au
Perth Psychologists WA Pty Ltd (ACN: 621 786 098)