

Science of Addiction Fact Sheet:

What You Need to Know About Addiction

NATIONAL
COUNCIL
for Mental
Wellbeing

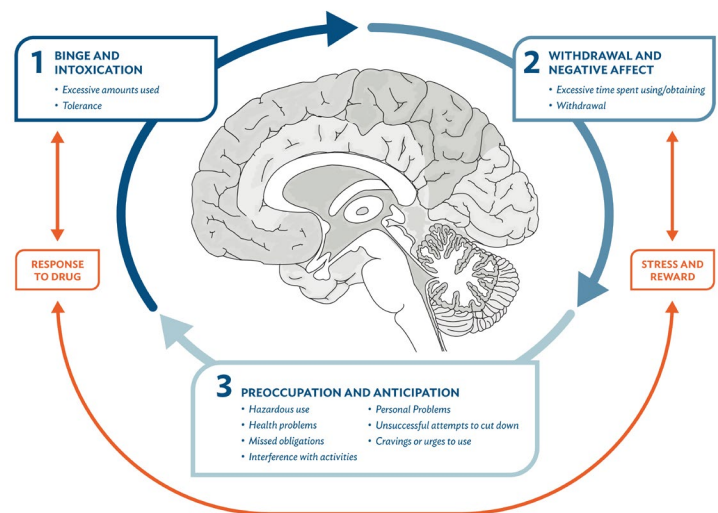
There are high rates of substance use and substance use disorder (SUD) among individuals involved with the U.S. criminal justice system. Research studies show that about 30% to 40% of those under community supervision have a substance use disorder (Lipari and Gfroerer, 2014). Many more may have problematic substance use that does not rise to the level of disorder. This fact sheet provides information to help community supervision officers understand the science behind SUD and addiction.

WHAT IS ADDICTION?

Addiction is a severe form of SUD. One of the most widespread myths about addiction is that individuals using alcohol and drugs can decide to quit at any time based upon good intentions and will power. Even though a person taking drugs may initially decide to engage in a new behavior, addiction is a psychological condition that compels people to engage in drug use. Addiction can often lead to health, relationship and legal consequences (National Association of Addiction Treatment Providers, n.d.).

HOW DOES ADDICTION IMPACT THE BRAIN?

Drugs are chemicals that disrupt normal brain communication by altering the way neurons send, receive and process signals (National Association of Addiction Treatment Providers, n.d.). Addiction is considered a brain disorder because it involves changes to brain circuits over time. Brain circuits are involved in reward, stress and self-control (National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2022). Compulsive drug use is one of the key characteristics of addiction. Changes in the brain interfere with an individual's ability to resist the compulsion to continue with drug use. The brain changes caused by addiction may also last a long time after a person has stopped taking drugs (Szubiak, 2022).



WHAT ARE THE RISKS ASSOCIATED WITH ADDICTION?

Addiction disrupts the normal, healthy functioning of organs in the body, can have harmful effects, including death (National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2020). Individuals living with addiction often have one or more associated health issues such as lung or heart disease, stroke, cancer, or mental health conditions (National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2022). Addiction can cause damaging effects throughout the body as a result long-term drug use. Drug use can also increase the risk of contracting infections.

IS ADDICTION TREATABLE?

Addiction is preventable and treatable in many cases medications such as buprenorphine, methadone and extended release naltrexone are first-line treatments for opioid addiction because they can help reduce opioid cravings and withdrawal symptoms (National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2017). These medications can decrease opioid use, overdose deaths and criminal activity while increasing social functioning and treatment retention. They can also restore balance to the brain circuits affected by addiction, allowing the patient's brain to heal while they work toward recovery (National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2017). An important part of effective treatment is tailoring services to fit the needs of the individual through medication, recovery supports and/or evidence-based therapies. When possible, a robust continuum of services and care for individuals with a SUD should be available; however, access to medication should not depend on receiving or participating in behavioral therapies or other services (National Council for Mental Wellbeing, 2020).

HOW CAN COMMUNITY SUPERVISION HELP SUPERVISEES WITH SUD WHO MAY EXPERIENCE ADDICTION?

Community supervision officers can facilitate and support positive change in the health of individuals with SUD, who may be experiencing addiction. By incorporating evidence-informed practices, monitoring goals set by supervision requirements and implementing core components of overdose prevention and response, community supervision programs can support individuals who have a SUD in their recovery.

Community supervision officers can work with supervisees to assess whether they have a SUD.

Screening for SUDs can help identify indicators, or “red flags,” for the presence of mental health, substance use or other challenges. Screening may include a brief interview, use of self-report instruments and a review of archival records. Routine screening for SUDs during intake or supervision visits can determine the need for specialized services and for further assessment (SAMHSA, 2019).

Community supervision officers can also act as “coaches” rather than “referees” to support an individual’s whole-person success (Lovins et al., 2018). A balance of rewards and graduated responses can encourage pro-social behavior and participation in treatment (National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2014). Providing treatment to individuals under supervision with SUD can lower the risk of being resentenced for a new offense. Treatment also enhances public health and public safety by reducing crime and other health or societal burdens related to SUD, such as the transmission of infectious diseases (National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2017).



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