

Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Overcoming Drug Dependency: A Prescription for Recovery

The growing epidemic of prescription drug addiction has become front-page news. It's an issue that affects people of almost all ages, backgrounds and income levels in virtually every North American community. But despite all the attention, it's often difficult to recognize when you or a loved one has a problem—and even more so to take the first steps to seek help.

Prescription Positives

Unlike their illegal street-level counterparts, prescription drugs are generally safe and often very helpful when a doctor prescribes and monitors their use. Doctors recommend drugs as part of the treatment for a wide range of physical and psychological health conditions.

While drugs can carry some risk for serious side-effects, doctors will only prescribe them when the potential benefits outweigh the dangers. Taken as directed, medication can allow people battling chronic pain and other difficult conditions to lead normal, productive lives. Drugs can also provide much needed short-term relief while counselling, physiotherapy and other non-pharmaceutical treatments, as well as the body's natural healing, begin to take effect.

The Other Side of Prescription Drugs

Even with their medical benefits, some prescription drugs such as narcotic painkillers, sedatives and stimulants are highly addictive. Drugs take away uncomfortable symptoms like pain or anxiety, and it can be hard to find other ways of dealing with these conditions if they still linger after a prescription ends. Prescription medication can also be easily abused, either by taking a larger dosage than required, not following a recommended schedule, or using the drug for a reason other than the one prescribed.

When a person abuses prescription drugs, they dramatically increase their risk of developing serious, potentially deadly side-effects. This is especially true for those taking more than one drug, since mixing any medications without a doctor's approval can be extremely dangerous.

The Red Flags of Prescription Drug Addiction

Since virtually anyone can become addicted to prescription drugs, it's often very difficult to recognize and admit when you or a loved one has a drug problem. Many prescription drug abusers will appear happy and successful while hiding a potentially deadly secret. Here are some key signs that it may be time to seek help:

Continued drug use. A strong sign of possible prescription drug addiction is a person who continues to take medication against a doctor's orders after their medical condition has improved. He or she may try to justify their need for more medication by complaining about vague symptoms or promising to stop after "just one more refill."

Increased drug use. People who take prescription drugs excessively will start to build up a tolerance to them over time. Because of this, they'll likely start taking their medication in a larger dose or more frequently to get the same effect.

Mood changes. Those addicted to medication may have frequent or extreme mood swings, a significant change in their energy level or problems concentrating.

Social withdrawal. Addiction can become the main focus of life. A person abusing prescriptions drugs may start to spend less time with friends or family, or on activities they previously enjoyed. He or she might also begin neglecting personal hygiene and noticeably change sleeping or eating habits.

Multiple "suppliers." People dependent on prescription drugs will often go to great lengths to fuel the habit. They may visit multiple doctors and pharmacists to get prescriptions filled, or begin buying pills from questionable sources. Alternatively, they could also start asking for or taking someone else's medication.

A "sickly" appearance. As prescription drug addiction becomes more serious, a person's physical health will start to suffer. They may gain or lose weight, appear tired, or have a constant cough and runny nose. Their eyes may also appear droopy, red and dilated and their speech could become slurred.

Defensiveness. Individuals trying to hide or deny a prescription drug habit will often become very defensive when questioned about anything related to their medication or health. For example, they might blow up over a friend's casual observation about the number of pills they're taking.

Withdrawal symptoms. Those addicted to certain prescription drugs might go through physical withdrawal symptoms when they stop taking the medication. These might include anxiety, nausea, vomiting, goose bumps or dilated pupils, among others. Or, someone with a drug habit may also continue to take medication, even when it causes them negative side-effects.

Confronting Addiction

Few things in life are more difficult than confronting a friend or loved one who you suspect might be abusing drugs. But as hard as it may be, it's critical that you have the discussion as early as possible. Like any addiction, dependence on prescription drugs can become much worse over time. If not treated early, prescription drug abuse can eventually cost a loved one with an addiction his or her health, family, freedom, or even life.

Openly share your suspicions and concerns with the person, and offer your full support towards recovery. Most people addicted to prescription drugs will react to this conversation by denying that they have a problem, or giving reasons why they can't go into a treatment program. To handle this, come to the discussion prepared with specific examples of the behavior that concerns you. Also, do some research into treatment options and be ready to address common concerns about cost, confidentiality and time commitments.

Help is Available

With the right resources and professional support, it's possible for anyone to beat the cycle of prescription drug addiction. There are many effective treatment options available, though it may take some time to find the right fit for the situation. Here are some of the options to begin with when you decide to seek help for yourself or a loved one:

Rehab programs. Detoxification may be necessary to break serious addictions. These programs help those with addictions manage withdrawal symptoms while slowly weaning them off the drug. There are a wide range of rehab programs and services available specifically for people with prescription drug dependence.

Behavioral therapy. In these programs, counselors help individuals change their thoughts and behavior helping them function without drugs, deal with cravings and avoid situations where they're likely to relapse. Therapy may also address underlying issues like depression or anxiety.

Peer support groups. From formal 12-step programs, to online message boards, there are many ways to
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benefit from the support and experience of people facing similar challenges. There are programs that meet regularly in almost every community and services are often available at no charge.

Books and online resources. There are many excellent self-help materials available, both in print and online. These resources can be a great supplement to other treatment methods. Be sure to discuss the situation with a doctor, counselor or other trained professional before attempting any self-help program.

Recognizing and overcoming a prescription drug addiction can be difficult and overwhelming to both the person dependent on medication and those around them. But drug dependency isn't something you or your loved ones have to face alone. Today, more than ever, knowledge, resources and support services are available to help break the cycle of addiction and get on the road to a healthy recovery.