



**THE TRUTH  
ABOUT "REHAB" &  
DRUG ADDICTION**

**The reality is far from glamorous**

Popular culture is filled with stories about the glitzy lives of celebrities, from the designer clothes they wear to their latest romances. It's easy to assume that everything they do is glamorous—including going to “rehab.”

“Rehab” is a commonly used term

that can refer to a range of drug treatment options. While some of the centers you see in the news might seem like five-star resorts, there is a big difference: These centers are designed to treat drug and alcohol addiction—which is anything but glamorous. The reality is that it's a serious disease that

affects the brain and body. Addiction can destroy what people love most—their personal relationships, their careers, and, for some, their lives.

The good news is that, with treatment, people suffering from drug and alcohol addiction can recover and live long, healthy lives.

## What Is Drug Addiction?

People who are addicted to drugs have a compulsive and sometimes uncontrollable craving for them. Using drugs changes the brain. Once addicted, a person wants to use drugs even when he or she faces extremely negative consequences.

That was the case with Edward, 31, who is recovering from drug addiction. Looking back at his teen years, he remembers that his drug addiction led him to miss school, receive bad grades, and get into trouble at home and with the law. He recalls dismissing all of the bad things that happened because of his drug use. “Once I was addicted, nothing could stop me from taking drugs. I saw the negative consequences I faced from taking drugs as obstacles to my [drug] use and lifestyle rather than as a wake-up call,” Edward says.

## Treating a Chronic Disease

Even after successfully completing a drug treatment program, people who are addicted to drugs may relapse. This is because drug addiction is a chronic disease, like asthma or diabetes—it requires long-term treatment to help people get to a point where they can manage their recovery and regain their lives. Also, as with other chronic diseases, patients can relapse. Relapse does not mean that treatment failed—rather it’s a signal that treatment should be started again or modified to make it more effective. The chronic nature of addiction means that people may need treatment or support throughout their lives, and patients often need treatment multiple times to manage the disease.

## Issues With Getting Help

Many people who need treatment for drug or alcohol abuse do not receive it. In 2007, 23.2 million people age 12 or older needed treatment, but only 2.4 million individuals—about 10.3 percent of people in need—actually received treatment for their addiction problems.

Why are some teens and adults not getting the help they need? Some people won’t admit they have a problem. Sometimes people don’t know how to get help. Others know

**“You don’t have to wait until you’ve hit rock bottom to get help. The earlier you get help, the sooner you can begin to recover.”**

they have a problem and how to get help but don’t seek treatment for a range of different reasons.

It is important to get help as soon as there is a problem. As Dr. Nora D. Volkow, Director of the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA), points out, “You don’t have to wait until you’ve hit rock bottom to get help. The earlier you get help, the sooner you can begin to recover.”

## Where Treatment Occurs

Residential treatment centers—places where people live and receive intensive treatment and supervision for varying amounts of time—are just one place to get help. People may

also receive treatment in hospitals and outpatient clinics. Treatment centers may offer multiple types of treatment, including one-on-one behavioral therapy, group therapy and, when available and appropriate, the use of medications.

Once someone decides to get help, it may take time to determine the best

## Overlapping Illnesses

Two illnesses that occur simultaneously are called *comorbid*. Drug addiction is often comorbid with other mental illnesses (addiction is itself a mental illness).

Why is addiction comorbid with other mental illnesses? One reason may be that there are common brain areas involved and possibly even shared genes. Another is that environmental triggers, like stress, that can lead a person to use drugs can also cause mental illnesses, like depression. Similarly, people experiencing the symptoms of a mental illness may turn to drugs or alcohol to cope.

Finally, like drug addiction, other mental illnesses often begin in adolescence, when the brain is undergoing dramatic changes. Using drugs may affect the brain in ways that increase the risk for mental illnesses, including drug addiction, particularly in individuals with genetic or other risk factors.



Photo: © Fancy/Year/Corbis.

## Where to Find Help

- If you think you have a drug addiction, talk to your doctor or a trusted friend or adult.
- If you or someone you know is in trouble with drugs, there are treatment centers around the country that can help. To locate a treatment center, visit <http://findtreatment.samhsa.gov> or contact **1-800-662-HELP**.
- If you need immediate help with a crisis, contact **1-800-273-TALK**.
- For more information on the signs and symptoms of using drugs, go to <http://teens.drugabuse.gov> or [www.scholastic.com/headsup](http://www.scholastic.com/headsup).
- To order additional publications about drugs and your body, visit [www.drugabuse.gov](http://www.drugabuse.gov) or call **NIDA DrugPubs** at **1-877-643-2644**.



Photo: © Jim Craigmyle/Corbis.

treatment program. There is no quick fix for drug addiction. As with other chronic diseases, it often requires long-term, continuous treatment.

### Treatment

Whether at a residential treatment center or an outpatient program, behavioral therapy can play a major role in helping a person manage his or her drug addiction. In one type of behavioral therapy, known as Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, patients come to terms with the harmful consequences of their addiction to drugs. They also learn coping skills for avoiding “triggers” and remaining drug-free.

Avoiding triggers means staying away from things that might cause, or trigger, a person to begin abusing drugs again. As with asthma patients, who avoid dust or smoke to prevent an asthma attack, a person recovering from drug addiction needs to avoid hanging out with friends who abuse drugs and, when possible, avoid extreme stress, which can also trigger a relapse.

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy also can help individuals deal with depression and other mood or anxiety disorders that sometimes go hand in hand with a drug addiction.

For support, people often turn to others in recovery in group therapy settings. People recovering from drug addiction share their experiences and struggles with others facing the same issues.

It was this type of therapy that finally worked for Edward. He received treatment at all types of facilities, including outpatient programs, 28-day and 60–90 day residential drug treatment centers, and a halfway house before he figured out what worked best.

### Medications

Some medications can help patients stop abusing certain types of drugs, stay in treatment, and avoid a relapse. Once a person has decided to begin treatment, the first step is often detoxification: the process that allows a person’s body to get rid of a drug such as heroin

or cocaine. During this process, a physician may help the person to manage symptoms of withdrawal by administering medications.

Patients also may be able to take medications to help them avoid abusing drugs again. People with an opiate addiction may be prescribed methadone or buprenorphine. Nicotine replacement treatments, such as nicotine gum or the nicotine patch, can help a person addicted to cigarettes quit smoking. Other medications such as naltrexone and disulfiram can help people recover from alcohol addiction.

### Road to Recovery

Even when a variety of treatments are available, relapses may be part of a person’s path to recovery from drug addiction. “I was in and out for several years,” says Edward. But treatment for drug addiction does work. The most successful treatment addresses each patient’s individual drug-abuse patterns and drug-related medical, psychiatric, and social problems. For Edward, becoming willing to accept help from others was the key to long-term recovery. As he explains, “Once I was ready to accept help from other people, I didn’t have a relapse. I’ve been in recovery for seven years now.”

### CRITICAL THINKING

1. Drug users often go in and out of treatment centers, or resume taking drugs after being off drugs. Why might this be the case?
2. How are depictions of treatment centers in the media often different than the realities?