

## Addictive Behaviour

We all develop ways of coping with anxious and depressed feelings, or changes in mood. Positive ways might include activities such as listening to music, going for a walk or talking to friends. Or we might resort to a cup of coffee, a glass of wine or a cigarette to make us feel instantly better. This leaflet is for when things feel as if they are getting out of control and you feel your health and general wellbeing are affected.

### What do we mean by addictive behaviour?

When people talk of addiction, they often mean a dependence on drugs, alcohol or other substances for example tobacco which are harmful to health. But there are other kinds of behaviour that can cause problems possibly because they involve practices that might make you ill, or because the activities upset or worry you, or threaten to take over your life. The following list gives an idea of the variety of substances and activities that people can become addicted to:

- drugs, legal and illegal
- alcohol
- cigarettes
- food (and practices involving food, such as restricting your intake, bulimia, compulsive eating)
- activities involving your body sometimes amounting to self-harm/self-mutilation, e.g. hair pulling, burning, cutting, stabbing
- compulsive sexual activity
- compulsive exercising
- day dreaming, fantasising, to the point where reality gets forgotten
- obsessional thinking
- compulsive shopping
- shoplifting
- gambling

In some circumstances people come to rely on these substances or activities to induce a different state of mind. You'll probably be aware of the fact that some drugs induce a calm or more depressed mood, while others are stimulating or exciting. Sometimes they can be physically addictive, but we can often

become psychologically addicted to ways of behaving that help us block out difficult or painful feelings and thoughts.

### How do you know if you're addicted?

It is difficult to be prescriptive about this, as some potentially addictive substances are part of our everyday life. But you could ask yourself, honestly, the following questions:

- am I unable to stop? (try it and see what happens)
- does it prevent me from working or interfere with my relationships with others?
- do I spend a lot of time thinking or worrying about it?
- is it affecting my health?

If the answers to these questions are "yes", you may decide to take action.

### Suggestions for self help:

**Take stock of your behaviour.** Keeping a diary, noting what seems to trigger the behaviour that worries you, is a good first step. For example, if you are drinking too much, recording how much you are actually drinking, and the circumstances which seem to precipitate it, can help you assess how serious the issue is.

**Make a plan to cut down or stop the worrying behaviour.** Try to put it into action and then note your reactions. You may find that you feel restless or agitated, for example, or depressed. If these feelings become unbearable, or you find you can't stop, you may need to think of getting professional help.

**Understanding the causes.** Very often addictive behaviour of all kinds is a response to a personal crisis or difficult circumstances, either ongoing or resulting from issues from your childhood. Developing an addiction to something may have helped, to begin with, in surviving these circumstances. But then the addiction itself becomes the problem, because of the feelings of depression,

self disgust and shame it induces. Understanding why you became addicted in the first place can help you take hold of the problem and take action.

**Try not to judge yourself too harshly.** Overcoming an addiction is not easy, and can be very hard work. You may find you have a number of setbacks before you finally manage to kick the habit. People who are addicted to substances or self-destructive behaviour are often their own most severe critics and this can get in the way of making changes; they are apt to feel that any setback confirms their inability to overcome the habit

**Talk to someone you trust.** You may find that confiding in a friend helps. S/he may be able to encourage you to stick to your resolve, if you're mildly addicted, or support you in getting further help.

### Remember, help is there if you want it.

#### How you can get further help:

It is in the nature of addictive behaviour that it is hard to overcome, and you may well need to get professional help. This may focus initially in supporting you in stopping the behaviour. This is often the priority, particularly when your health is at stake. You may find once you've managed to achieve some degree of control that it is useful to have a space to think about the difficulties that contributed to your getting addicted in the first place. Counselling can allow you to reflect upon and come to terms with upsetting issues, and understand your response to difficult situations.

The following organisations focus on specific problems:

#### **FRANK (confidential drugs advice)**

0300 123 6600  
82111 (text)

#### **Alcoholics Anonymous Helpline**

0800 9177 650

#### **Barnet Recovery Centre**

0300 303 2866

#### **BEAT (beating eating disorders)**

0808 801 0677

#### **The Samaritans**

116 123

#### **NAPAC (National Association for People Abused in Childhood)**

0808 801 0331

You can approach other professionals such as a GP, Practice Nurse.

### How to contact the Counselling and Mental Health Service

Please see website for up-to-date service details:

<http://unihub.mdx.ac.uk/cmh>

The UniHelp Desk will be happy to tell you where to find the Counselling Service or you can contact us at [cmh@mdx.ac.uk](mailto:cmh@mdx.ac.uk)

### Further leaflets in this series

Abuse  
Anxiety and panic  
Bereavement and loss  
Coming to Britain to study  
Coping with trauma  
Depression  
Eating disorders  
Exam anxiety  
Helping someone you are concerned about  
Managing stress  
Mature students  
Mental health  
Presentation skills  
Relaxation  
Work difficulties and study blocks  
Working in groups

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