



WES WOODLAND  
COUNSELLING

# Addiction

*A helpful guide.*

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# *Disclaimer*

I'm definitely not an expert on these topics. I'm just sharing what I've learned along the way. This comes from my own experiences as a therapy client, what I've picked up in my work as a counsellor, books I've read, videos I've watched, and advice from other professionals. I've pulled it all together into this free PDF, hoping it'll be useful for you. Just remember, this isn't a replacement for professional advice or therapy. It's more of a little resource to support you on your journey.



# Definition

According to Dr. Gabor Maté (who's renowned for his expertise on addiction), addiction is "any behaviour that gives you temporary relief, temporary pleasure, but in the long term causes harm, has some negative consequences and you can't give it up, despite those negative consequences."<sup>[1]</sup>

In my experience, addiction is a way to avoid the present moment, disconnect from oneself, and an attempt to cope with difficult feelings. Someone may have reached for a substance or a behaviour as a coping tool, but now that same coping tool has spiralled into an addiction and taken over that person's life.



# Types of Addiction

Addictions are commonly categorised into two sections: substance addiction and behavioural addiction. Within that many people struggle with more than one addiction simultaneously. Substance addiction might be combined with a behavioural addiction or one addiction might be replaced with another after quitting. Additionally, mental health problems like depression or anxiety can co-occur with addiction.

Substance addiction involves the compulsive use of drugs or alcohol. Behavioural addiction, also called process addictions, involve compulsive engagement in activities.

Category	Type	Extra Info/Examples
Substance	<b>Alcohol Addiction</b>	One of the most widespread addictions, affecting physical and mental health.
	<b>Opioid Addiction</b>	Prescription painkillers and heroin. Highly addictive, often linked to prescription medications like oxycodone or illicit substances like heroin.
	<b>Stimulant Addiction</b>	Cocaine, methamphetamine, ADHD medications. Includes both illicit stimulants and prescription drugs like Adderall.
	<b>Cannabis Addiction</b>	Often underestimated, but excessive use can lead to dependence.
	<b>Nicotine Addiction</b>	Smoking & Vaping. One of the most common yet socially accepted addictions.
	<b>Benzodiazepine Addiction</b>	Xanax, Valium, Ativan. Highly addictive anti-anxiety medications that can lead to dependence.
	<b>Other Prescription Drug Addictions</b>	Includes sedatives, sleeping pills, and even some antidepressants.
Behavioural	<b>Gambling Addiction</b>	Includes casinos, sports betting, online gambling, and stock market trading.
	<b>Gaming Addiction</b>	Excessive video gaming, leading to social isolation and health issues.
	<b>Food Addiction</b>	Compulsive overeating, often linked to emotional distress.
	<b>Sex &amp; Pornography Addiction</b>	Excessive sexual behaviour that interferes with daily life and relationships.
	<b>Shopping Addiction</b>	Impulsive spending, often to cope with emotions.
	<b>Social Media &amp; Internet Addiction</b>	Excessive screen time that affects mental health and productivity.
	<b>Work Addiction</b>	An obsession with work at the expense of personal life.



# Signs and symptoms

Addiction affects the brain's reward system, leading to compulsive behaviours despite negative consequences. The signs can be physical, psychological, and behavioural. Some key indicators are:

- **Loss of control** – Using more than intended or struggling to cut down.
- **Increased tolerance** – Needing more of a substance or activity to feel the same effect.
- **Withdrawal symptoms** – Physical or emotional distress when stopping.
- **Neglecting responsibilities** – Work, school, or relationships suffer due to addiction.
- **Prioritising substance/behaviour over everything else** – Loss of interest in previously enjoyed activities.
- **Continued use despite harm** – Ignoring negative consequences.

## Physical symptoms of substance addiction:

- Bloodshot eyes, dilated or constricted pupils
- Sudden weight loss or gain
- Poor hygiene and self-care
- Unexplained injuries or frequent illnesses
- Changes in sleep patterns (insomnia or excessive sleep)
- Shaking, sweating, or flu-like symptoms (especially during withdrawal)

## Physical symptoms of behavioural addiction:

- Fatigue or exhaustion from excessive engagement (e.g., gaming, gambling)
- Repetitive strain injuries (e.g., from phone or computer use)
- Headaches, body aches, or digestive issues from stress



## Psychological and emotional symptoms:

- Anxiety, depression, or mood swings
- Irritability or aggression when unable to engage in the addiction
- Feelings of guilt or shame about the behaviour
- Paranoia or hallucinations (in severe substance abuse cases)
- Difficulty concentrating or making decisions

## Behavioural and social symptoms:

- Secrecy or lying about usage/behaviour
- Withdrawing from family and friends
- Sudden financial problems (spending excessively on substances, gambling, shopping)
- Risk-taking behaviour (driving under the influence, unsafe sex, stealing)
- Engaging in addiction despite job loss, relationship breakdowns, or legal trouble



# Causes and risk factors

Addiction is not caused by one singular thing, but is often biopsychosocial.<sup>[2]</sup> Research has shown that genetics (bio) play a role, meaning that addiction runs in the family. Additionally, people who've experienced traumatic events, struggle with mental health concerns (anxiety, depression, etc.), experience low self-esteem, and who exhibit certain traits (sensation-seeking, impulsivity, etc.) might be more inclined to seek out substances/addictive behaviours because they're trying to manage difficult emotions. Finally, the environment (social) plays a role in addiction. Societal norms, availability, and cultural beliefs all play a part in whether someone becomes addicted.

This doesn't mean that any one of these factors will indefinitely cause someone to become addicted. It just means the individual may be more susceptible. For example, a teen who experiences a traumatic event might not become an alcoholic just because his grandparent was—if the teen has a supportive social network and accesses help early-on, they're perfectly able to heal and move on from the experience without ever feeling the need to self-soothe with substances or addictive behaviours.

Finally, situational or lifestyle factors can also play a part:

- **Recreational Use Escalating to Dependence** – Occasional use can spiral into addiction, especially with substances like opioids or stimulants.
- **Pain Management & Prescription Drugs** – People prescribed painkillers or sedatives may become dependent without realising.
- **Boredom & Lack of Purpose** – Addiction can fill a void in individuals who feel directionless or unfulfilled.
- **Financial Status** – Poverty increases stress-related addiction risks, while wealth can enable access to substances or compulsive spending.



# Impact

Addiction is more than just a bad habit—it rewires the brain, damages the body, and affects emotional well-being. The longer an addiction continues, the more severe the consequences become. Key areas impacted by addiction are:

- **Physical health** – Damage to organs, immune system, and overall well-being.
- **Mental health** – Increased risk of anxiety, depression, and other disorders.
- **Cognitive function** – Memory loss, impaired decision-making, and reduced focus.
- **Emotional stability** – Mood swings, paranoia, and emotional numbness.
- **Social and relational health** – Strained relationships, isolation, and loss of trust.

## On Physical Health

Different substances and behaviours have unique physical effects, but most addictions take a toll on general health.

### Short-Term Effects

- Changes in heart rate and blood pressure
- Impaired coordination and motor skills
- Nausea, vomiting, or digestive issues
- Increased risk of accidents or overdoses

### Long-Term Effects

- **Liver & Kidney Damage** – Alcohol and drug addiction can lead to organ failure.
- **Heart Disease & Stroke** – Many substances, including nicotine and stimulants, strain the cardiovascular system.
- **Weakened Immune System** – Chronic substance use makes the body more vulnerable to infections.
- **Lung Damage** – Smoking, vaping, or inhaling substances can lead to respiratory diseases.
- **Chronic Pain & Neuropathy** – Some addictions cause nerve damage, leading to persistent pain.
- **Malnutrition & Weight Fluctuations** – Appetite changes can result in severe weight loss or gain.

**Behavioural addictions** can also have physical consequences:

- **Gaming & Internet Addiction** – Eye strain, poor posture, sleep disorders.
- **Food Addiction** – Obesity, diabetes, cardiovascular disease.
- **Gambling Addiction** – High stress levels leading to hypertension and ulcers.

## On Mental & Emotional Health

Addiction and mental health are closely linked. Many people develop addiction due to underlying mental health issues, while addiction itself worsens emotional well-being.

### Common Mental Health Issues Linked to Addiction:

- **Depression & Suicidal Thoughts** – Substance use can worsen feelings of hopelessness.
- **Anxiety & Panic Disorders** – Some drugs cause paranoia, while withdrawal triggers severe anxiety.
- **Psychosis & Hallucinations** – Heavy drug use (e.g., stimulants, hallucinogens) can lead to delusions and paranoia.
- **Mood Swings & Emotional Instability** – Substance use disrupts emotional regulation.
- **Memory Loss & Cognitive Decline** – Long-term addiction impairs focus, learning, and decision-making.

### How Addiction Affects Emotional Well-Being:

- Loss of motivation and sense of purpose
- Guilt, shame, and self-loathing
- Increased impulsivity and risk-taking behaviour
- Struggles with forming or maintaining relationships

## On Social & Relational

Addiction doesn't just harm the individual—it also affects family, friends, and colleagues.

- **Broken relationships** – Trust issues, arguments, and emotional distance.
- **Financial difficulties** – Excessive spending on substances, gambling, or compulsive shopping.
- **Work & Academic Struggles** – Reduced performance, absenteeism, or job loss.
- **Social Isolation** – Addiction often leads to withdrawal from friends and family.



Family members of addicts often experience stress, anxiety, and emotional exhaustion. Some may develop co-dependent behaviours or struggle with feelings of helplessness.

## The Brain & Addiction: Why It's Hard to Quit

Addiction hijacks the brain's reward system, making it difficult to stop even when negative consequences arise.

- **Dopamine Dysregulation** – Addictive substances flood the brain with dopamine, making everyday pleasures feel dull in comparison.
- **Impaired Decision-Making** – The prefrontal cortex, responsible for rational thinking, is weakened by addiction.
- **Cravings & Triggers** – The brain develops strong associations with substance use, making relapse more likely.

Over time, addiction reprograms the brain to prioritise the addictive behaviour over everything else—including health, relationships, and responsibilities.



# Trauma

Not everyone who experiences trauma develops an addiction, but trauma significantly increases the risk. Research shows that people with unresolved trauma are more likely to use substances or addictive behaviours as a form of self-medication.

Trauma is any deeply distressing experience that overwhelms a person's ability to cope. It's not necessarily about *what* happened, but about *how* it impacted the individual. This includes:

- **Acute trauma** – A single, intense event (e.g., assault, accident, natural disaster).
- **Chronic trauma** – Repeated exposure to distress (e.g., childhood neglect, domestic abuse).
- **Complex trauma** – A combination of traumas that affect a person's identity and relationships.

Because trauma affects the nervous system and brain chemistry, many survivors struggle with emotional regulation, hypervigilance, anxiety, or emotional numbness—states that addiction can temporarily relieve.

## The Window of Tolerance

The window of tolerance is a psychological concept describing the emotional zone where we function best. Within this window, we can process emotions, handle stress, and respond to challenges without extreme reactions. Trauma disrupts this balance, making it difficult to stay within the window. When someone becomes emotionally overwhelmed, they shoot out of their window of tolerance into either:

- **Hyperarousal (fight-or-flight mode):** Anxiety, panic, anger, hypervigilance.  
or
- **Hypoarousal (shutdown mode):** Numbness, dissociation, depression.

People who struggle with hyperarousal or hypoarousal may turn to addiction because substances and behaviours artificially regulate stress hormones like cortisol, dopamine, and endorphins.

- **Alcohol, opioids, and sedatives** calm hyperarousal by numbing anxiety.
- **Stimulants (e.g., cocaine, amphetamines)** energise those in a state of hypoarousal.
- **Behavioural addictions** (e.g., gambling, binge eating, compulsive sex) offer bursts of dopamine, providing short-term relief from distress.

For trauma survivors, addiction feels like a lifeline, keeping emotions within a tolerable range, but this relief is temporary and comes at a cost.

## Addiction Shrinks the Window of Tolerance

While addiction initially helps manage emotional distress, it ultimately narrows the window of tolerance, making emotions harder to regulate without substances or compulsive behaviours. How this happens:

- **Brain Chemistry Adaptation** – The brain reduces its natural production of dopamine and endorphins, making joy, relaxation, and pleasure harder to experience naturally.
- **Increased Sensitivity to Stress** – Over time, minor stressors feel overwhelming because the brain has lost its ability to regulate emotions without external substances.
- **More Frequent Cravings & Dependence** – The need for substances grows stronger to compensate for the shrinking window.
- **Greater Emotional Volatility** – Without the addictive behaviour, people experience more intense anxiety, depression, and mood swings.

In the long run, what once felt like a solution becomes the very thing making life harder to manage.

## Healing Trauma Without Addiction

The good news is that the brain and nervous system can heal. Trauma-informed addiction recovery focuses on expanding the window of tolerance, so people can regulate emotions in a healthy way. Key approaches to healing include:

- **Somatic Therapy** – Helps reconnect the body and mind, releasing trauma stored in the nervous system.
- **Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) & EMDR** – Addresses negative thought patterns and rewires trauma responses.
- **Mindfulness & Breathwork** – Helps stabilise emotions and increase self-awareness.
- **Safe Relationships & Support Groups** – Strengthen emotional resilience through connection and trust.
- **Gradual Exposure to Stressors** – Teaches the brain to handle stress without falling into hyper- or hypoarousal.

By addressing trauma at its root, people regain emotional balance without needing addiction as a coping mechanism.

# Recovery

The good news is that many physical and mental health effects of addiction are reversible with the right support. Recovery can lead to:

- Improved brain function and emotional stability
- Restoration of physical health
- Rebuilding of relationships and trust
- Increased self-confidence and life satisfaction

Early intervention leads to better long-term outcomes. Seeking treatment can significantly improve overall well-being and quality of life.

## What Is Addiction Recovery?

Recovery isn't just about stopping substance use or addictive behaviours—it's about healing physically, mentally, and emotionally. It involves learning new coping strategies, rebuilding relationships, and creating a fulfilling life beyond addiction.

### Key Elements of Recovery:

- **Abstinence or Harm Reduction** – Depending on the addiction and treatment approach.
- **Emotional Healing** – Addressing underlying trauma, mental health, and self-esteem.
- **Building a Support Network** – Connecting with peers, family, or professionals.
- **Developing Healthy Coping Mechanisms** – Finding alternatives to addictive behaviours.

Recovery is a journey, not a destination—there's no single timeline, and setbacks are part of the process.

## The Stages of Recovery

Recovery typically follows several stages, based on the Transtheoretical Model of Change:

1. **Precontemplation** – The individual may not recognise their addiction or see a need for change.
2. **Contemplation** – They begin considering recovery but feel uncertain or fearful.
3. **Preparation** – A decision is made to seek help, and initial steps are taken.

4. **Action** – Actively engaging in treatment, therapy, or self-help strategies.
5. **Maintenance** – Long-term recovery efforts to prevent relapse and sustain change.
6. **Relapse (if it happens)** – A temporary setback that can be part of the learning process.

Understanding these stages helps individuals navigate recovery with realistic expectations.

## Types of Treatment for Addiction

Professional treatment significantly improves the chances of long-term recovery. Options vary depending on the individual's needs, addiction type, and severity.

### Inpatient Rehab (Residential Treatment)

- **Best for:** Severe addictions, co-occurring mental health disorders, or those needing a structured environment.
- **What to Expect:** 24/7 care, therapy, medical detox, and holistic treatments.

### Outpatient Treatment

- **Best for:** Those with milder addictions or strong external support systems.
- **What to Expect:** Scheduled therapy sessions while continuing daily life.

### Detox Programmes

- **Best for:** Those needing medical supervision while withdrawing from substances.
- **What to Expect:** Safe, monitored withdrawal with medical and emotional support.

### Therapy & Counselling

- **Best for:** Anyone in recovery—helps address underlying issues and triggers.
- **Common Approaches:**
  - **Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT)** – Identifies and changes unhealthy thought patterns.
  - **Dialectical Behaviour Therapy (DBT)** – Helps manage intense emotions.
  - **Trauma-Informed Therapy** – Addresses past experiences that contribute to addiction.

## Peer Support & Fellowship in Recovery

Many people find strength in fellowship and peer support groups. These provide connection, accountability, and shared wisdom.

### 12-Step Programmes (e.g., Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous)

- Based on spiritual principles, surrendering control, and making amends.
- Follows structured steps for personal growth and accountability.

### Non-12-Step Alternatives (e.g., SMART Recovery)

- Focuses on self-empowerment, evidence-based strategies, and rational thinking.

### Online & In-Person Support Groups

- Options for those who prefer digital or in-person connections.
- Includes forums, social media groups, and professional-led sessions.

Support networks reduce isolation and increase resilience in recovery.

## Rebuilding & Thriving

Recovery isn't just about stopping an addiction—it's about creating a meaningful, fulfilling life.

### Steps Toward a Fulfilling Life:

- **Finding Purpose** – Setting goals and pursuing passions.
- **Strengthening Relationships** – Rebuilding trust with family and friends.
- **Prioritising Mental & Physical Health** – Maintaining well-being through self-care.
- **Giving Back** – Helping others in recovery through mentorship or volunteering.

Many people in recovery find that life becomes richer and more rewarding than they ever imagined.



# Relapse Prevention

Relapse is when a person returns to substance use or addictive behaviours after a period of abstinence. It's common in recovery and doesn't mean treatment has failed—it means new strategies are needed to reinforce long-term change.

Relapse rarely happens suddenly—it builds up in stages:

1. **Emotional relapse** – Stress, isolation, or unhealthy thinking patterns return.
2. **Mental relapse** – Cravings increase, and the mind starts justifying use.
3. **Physical relapse** – The individual returns to substance use or compulsive behaviour.

Recognising **early warning signs** is crucial to preventing full relapse.

## Identifying High-Risk Scenarios

Triggers are situations, emotions, or thoughts that increase the urge to return to addiction. Identifying them in advance helps people develop strategies to stay in control.

### Common High-Risk Triggers:

- **Emotional Triggers** – Stress, anxiety, depression, loneliness, boredom.
- **Social Triggers** – Being around people who use substances or engage in addictive behaviours.
- **Environmental Triggers** – Visiting places associated with past use.
- **Mental Triggers** – Thoughts like, *“One time won't hurt”* or *“I've been sober long enough—I can control it now.”*
- **Celebrations & Success** – Ironically, positive moments can also be a trigger (e.g., drinking to celebrate).

### How to manage high-risk situations:

- **Have an exit strategy** – Plan how to leave risky situations early.
- **Communicate boundaries** – Let people know you're avoiding triggers.
- **Develop healthy alternatives** – Replace old habits with new activities.

## Coping Strategies to Prevent Relapse

When cravings hit, having practical coping strategies can make the difference between relapse and resilience.



## 1. HALT: Check Your Basic Needs

HALT stands for **Hungry, Angry, Lonely, Tired**—four states that increase relapse risk. Before acting on cravings, ask yourself:

- ✓ Have I eaten recently?
- ✓ Am I feeling overwhelmed or frustrated?
- ✓ Do I need connection and support?
- ✓ Am I exhausted and in need of rest?

Taking care of basic needs can reduce cravings significantly.

## 2. Urge Surfing: Ride the Wave

Cravings come in waves—they build, peak, and pass. Instead of fighting them, acknowledge them without acting on them.

- **Pause & breathe** – Remind yourself the craving will pass.
- **Name the urge** – “I’m feeling an urge right now, but it doesn’t control me.”
- **Refocus** – Engage in an activity that shifts attention away.

There are also meditations you can do that help you ride the wave.

## 3. Delay & Distract

If the urge to relapse feels overwhelming, try this simple strategy:

- **Delay:** Tell yourself, “I’ll wait 15 minutes before making a decision.”
- **Distract:** Call a friend, exercise, listen to music, or journal your thoughts.

Delaying the impulse reduces its power and gives you time to choose recovery.

## Strengthening Your Support System

Isolation increases relapse risk, while connection strengthens recovery. Building a strong support system provides accountability, encouragement, and a sense of belonging.

### Key Support Strategies:

- Regular check-ins with a sponsor, therapist, or support group. This helps keep recovery a priority.
- Honest conversations with trusted friends & family. Let them know how they can support you.
- Attend recovery meetings consistently, whether it’s 12-Step (AA, NA) or alternatives like SMART Recovery.

Having people to call in difficult moments makes relapse less likely.

## Relapse Prevention Plan

A relapse prevention plan is a written strategy outlining:

- Your top personal triggers
- Healthy coping mechanisms for cravings
- People you can call for support
- Steps to take if a relapse happens

Example:

- *Trigger:* Feeling lonely on weekends.
- *Prevention Strategy:* Plan a social activity, call a friend, or attend a recovery meeting.
- *Emergency Contact:* Sponsor's phone number, support group chat.

Having a plan in place reduces panic when urges arise.

## What If Relapse Happens?

If a relapse happens, it's not the end of recovery. What matters is how you respond:

- **Avoid self-blame** – Shame can drive further relapse.
- **Analyse what led to it** – Identify the trigger and how to handle it differently.
- **Reach out for support** – A sponsor, therapist, or recovery group can help you refocus.
- **Restart, don't retreat** – One relapse doesn't erase all progress. Learn from it and move forward.

## Staying Committed to Recovery

Preventing relapse isn't about being perfect—it's about staying aware, prepared, and supported. Every challenge overcome makes recovery stronger.



# (Re)Sources

Here follows a list of helpful resources, all of which have also informed this guide.

## Fellowship Meetings

There are a host of online or face-to-face meetings offered globally. The only requirement for accessing a meeting is a desire to stop. There also specific meetings for men only, women only, LGBTQ+ only, etc.

<a href="#"><u>AA – Alcoholics Anonymous</u></a>	<a href="#"><u>NA – Narcotics Anonymous</u></a>	<a href="#"><u>CA – Cocaine Anonymous</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>GA – Gamblers Anonymous</u></a>	<a href="#"><u>SLAA – Sex &amp; Love Addicts Anonymous</u></a>	<a href="#"><u>CoDA – Co-Dependents Anonymous</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>OA – Overeaters Anonymous</u></a>	<a href="#"><u>CMA – Crystal Meth Anonymous</u></a>	<a href="#"><u>DA – Debtors Anonymous</u></a>

## Further Reading

[\*This Naked Mind\*](#) by Annie Grace

[\*Your Brain on Porn\*](#) by Gary Wilson

[\*The Craving Mind\*](#) by Judson Brewer

[\*Staying Sober\*](#) by Terence T. Gorski & Merlene Miller

[\*Set Boundaries, Find Peace\*](#) by Nedra Glover Tawwab

[\*The Easy Way to Stop Smoking\*](#) by Allen Carr

[\*Addiction as an Attachment Disorder\*](#) by Philip J. Flores

## Further Watching

[How Childhood Trauma Leads to Addiction](#)

[The Power of Addiction and the Addiction of Power](#)

## Support for Families

[AlAnon](#)



# About

Wes Woodland believes that counselling is about more than just solving problems. It's about creating a real connection where you can feel truly heard and understood. With experience ranging from a low-cost counselling agency to a prestigious residential rehab, Wes has worked with people from all walks of life. This has shown him that no two people are the same, so he tailors his approach to meet you exactly where you're at.

Wes doesn't believe in a one-size-fits-all approach. Instead, he brings his true self into the therapy room—straightforward, warm, and often with a touch of humour.

His approach is simple: be honest, be real, and create a space where you can relax enough to explore what's going on for you. Whether it's addiction, anxiety, trauma, or self-esteem struggles, Wes is here to help you find your way forward, at your own pace.

His counselling room in Blandford Forum is private and welcoming; a place where you can feel comfortable and safe to talk, and transform. But it's not just about the sessions. Wes believes that knowledge is a powerful tool for healing and that access to such resources can support you both in and out of therapy, so he's created a website filled with helpful blog posts and guides (like this one) on a variety of mental health topics. It's part of his belief that healing isn't just about therapy—it's about having the support you need, whenever you need it.

Some of the areas Wes works with include:

Abuse	Addiction	Anger	Anxiety
Attachment	Bullying	Burnout	Depression
Guilt	LGBTQ+ issues	Men's issues	Perfectionism
Relationships	Self-esteem	Shame	Trauma

Wes works with adults (18+) and offers both short-term and long-term therapy. Sessions are available in-person or online, and each session lasts 60 minutes. If you're ready to start your journey, or just want to know more, visit [www.weswoodlandcounselling.co.uk](http://www.weswoodlandcounselling.co.uk).

