

“In all my years as a physician, I have never, ever met an addicted person who wanted to be an addict.”

-Dr. Nora Volkow
NIDA Director

Nobody starts out intending to develop an addiction, but many people do.

The only way to 100% prevent addiction would be to NEVER do anything that could become addictive...but, that would mean NEVER:

- Shopping
- Gambling
- Playing video games
- Having sex
- Drinking coffee, tea or caffeinated soft drinks
- Eating
- Going online
- Having a beer, glass of wine or mixed drink
- Taking medication prescribed to you to treat pain, anxiety, ADHD, etc.
- Watching TV
- Working out
- Trying an “extreme” sport
- Smoking
- Working
- Getting plastic surgery
- And so on...

What do these things have in common? They feel good. The brain registers pleasure for all substances and activities in the same way-through the release of a chemical called dopamine. Simply put, whether or not you are addicted to something, you are likely to repeat a behavior that FEELS GOOD.

Addiction is more than just a habit, more than just doing what feels good. **Addiction takes over the structure and functioning of the brain.** This happens when the brain chemicals dopamine and glutamate interact to control the brain’s system of reward-related learning. This system links activities needed for human survival (such as eating and sex) with pleasure and reward. Addictive substances and behaviors stimulate the same circuit, and then overload it.

Once hijacked by addiction, the brain equates the addictive substances and behaviors to survival. An addict’s thoughts are influenced by strong cravings and a pre-occupation to get their next fix. An addict’s self-control is replaced by a loss of control over addiction seeking behaviors, not being able to “*put on the brakes*” or “*know when to say when.*” An addict’s sense of reason is overcome by a strong desire to continue substance use or an addictive behavior, despite bad consequences.

Addiction is often misunderstood, both by addicts and their family & friends. As the consequences of addiction take on a domino effect, the addict and those closest to him/her experience chaos and suffering. The common automatic responses of “*How could this have happened to you,*” and “*How could you do this to your family?*” only increase feelings of shame and anger AND are not effective at helping an addict seek help.

It is important to remember that addiction is a brain-based disease. ***In doing something that felt good, something went wrong. Addicts do not choose addiction, it chooses them.*** An addict has about as much control over the changes that are happening in their brain as someone with cardiovascular disease has over the plaque forming in their arteries-it is simply not something a person has control over.

The good news is, addiction is not a hopeless condition, but rather, a treatable disease. For tips on what you can do if someone you love has an addiction, see “*Tips for Family & Friends.*”