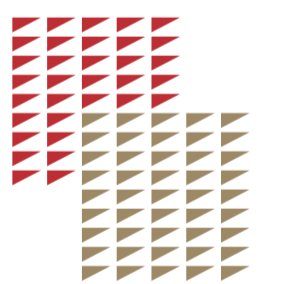




# What is Addiction and How is it Treated?



# About this book

This E-book has been produced as a guide to help explain some of the fundamental things you need to understand about addiction and its treatment, starting with an accurate and up-to-date definition of exactly what addiction is. This may seem straightforward but it is not, there is a lot of outdated and incorrect information about addiction circulating in the public domain which inevitably leads to poor choices in terms of the treatment facility chosen and the treatment methods adopted by an individual seeking help with addiction. Whether you are suffering from an addiction problem yourself, or are trying to understand and help a loved one that is, properly understanding what addiction is and what treatment options are available is essential to achieving lasting recovery.

Although this E-book has been produced and published by The Cabin Chiang Mai, a world-class residential rehab centre based in Northern Thailand, we have written the book as an impartial guide to understanding the fundamental questions of what addiction is and how it is treated. We obviously have a vested interest in you choosing us for treatment, and would add that as a first-class treatment centre utilizing modern and effective treatment methods with an outstanding success rate, we should be one of your choices for treatment.

Entering treatment is the first step to a life in recovery and is one of the most important decisions you will ever make. We are committed to helping you be sure you make the right one. Please visit [www.thecabinchiangmai.com](http://www.thecabinchiangmai.com) for more information and to contact us.

*The information and content contained in this book was written by Mr. Alastair Mordey, Programme Director at The Cabin Chiang Mai, Alcohol and Drug Rehab Centre.*

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# What is Addiction and How is it Treated?

Addiction is an illness which affects the reward system in the brain and is characterized by poor neurotransmission, particularly low dopamine production. Dopamine is the brain's reward chemical, so people suffering from addiction experience feelings of low reward when participating in activities which normal people would find sufficiently rewarding. This means sufferers of addiction need to self-medicate themselves with stronger rewards than 'normal' people.

The imbalance in brain chemicals, which causes and maintains addiction, can be caused in three main ways (or a combination of more than one).

1. Addiction is usually inherited as a primary illness. It is genetic in at least 50% of cases, but the real figure is probably much higher. In these cases sufferers are born with poor quality dopamine tone, which result in primary symptoms characterized by a state of ennui – or a feeling of weariness and discontent, lack of interest, boredom, low mood, lethargy, lack of meaning or lack of purpose. Drugs and alcohol (or other behaviours) then become compulsively sought as a way to relieve the symptoms.
2. Environmental factors like trauma, abuse or neglect can trigger addiction because these experiences can cause problems in the brain's chemistry. This can result in poor quality dopamine activity and a need to self-medicate with stronger rewards than normal activities can provide.
3. The traditional view that by abusing drugs or alcohol, people damage their brain function (particularly the dopamine system) which negatively affects dopamine transmission. This is actually probably the least likely way to become addicted.

So, contrary to popular belief, addiction is a primary illness and isn't caused by external factors like poverty or trauma or by actually taking drugs and alcohol. For most people suffering from addiction it is actually the other way around. Our addiction makes us use drugs, drink alcohol or gamble, because we need to 'self-medicate' the symptoms of naturally occurring or environmentally created low dopamine levels.



This means that people who have the disease of addiction need to find stronger rewarding feelings than ordinary people. Once we have discovered a reward that works, i.e. drugs, alcohol, gambling, most addicts find that they are then unable to stop using this substance /reward.

If you can identify yourself within this overview of addiction, you'll find this guide useful to:

- Help you select the right drug and alcohol rehab for you
- Decide what questions you need answers to before you commit to a particular facility
- Identify the risk factors of not seeking support and decide whether now is the right time for you to go into an addiction centre

### Why you can't stop using, even though you want to?

The inability to consistently abstain from addictive substances and /or behaviour is caused because the reward (dopamine) system is our brain's survival mechanism, which functions automatically and unconsciously. For people with addiction, getting a rewarding feeling is as important as drinking water would be for an ordinary person who is dying of thirst; so our brains survival system gets involved to make sure we keep doing it.

However, it's important to realise that addiction is a chronic illness which means we have to find a way of treating it, in the same way we would diabetes or other chronic illnesses. Because, unlike a common cold, it won't just 'clear up' of its own accord! Sufferers of addiction also need to understand that if you stop treating your addiction, the symptoms will resume and you will want to use drugs or alcohol again to feel better.

This is why addicts refer to themselves as being "in recovery" rather than "recovered". Recovery is an ongoing and lifetime process for the former drug or alcohol user.



## If addiction is a chronic illness, how can it be successfully treated?

The main methods used to treat addiction are 'behavioural', which means that addiction cannot be treated with traditional medicines alone, but rather things we 'do' to get better. It's these new behaviours, tools and coping methods that you will learn and implement when you go into a residential drug and alcohol addiction centre.

## Why do I need rehab, can't I just learn this stuff at home?

This simple answer to this question is no, and here's why:

- Addiction is driven by the brain's automatic survival system, so teaching ourselves is not an option because addiction is famous for being the only disease to tell you: you haven't got it! For the large majority of addicts it's essential to allow others who have found a practical, experience-based method of recovery, to help us.
- Experienced drugs counsellors help you develop positive ways of thinking and behaving over a long period of time, giving the brain time to make these recovery techniques part of its automatic response.
- Studies have shown that it takes up to three months to embed significant new ways of thinking, doing and speaking into our subconscious. The addict who experiences a high level of recovery usually completes a minimum of 6 to 12 weeks inpatient treatment and two months outpatient treatment – sometimes longer, but this time frame is dependent on the commitment and the progress of each individual.
- The life of the addict tends to be so 'chaotic' that the removal from their immediate environment and using triggers - something you will learn about in more depth in treatment - becomes essential to their long-term recovery.



What behaviour methods are used to effectively treat addiction when in drug and alcohol rehab?

Well this is a good question, and the methods used vary from facility to facility, but below you will find some of the most common and successful methods used to treat recovering addicts.

### ***CBT – (Cognitive Behavioural Therapy)***

CBT teaches self-administered techniques and written exercises to immediately lessen stress, depression, anxiety, guilt and fear.

### ***12 Steps***

Promotes a sense of belonging, being useful to others (feeling needed) reduces feelings of being less than others (shame), the ability to healthily manage anger, and techniques for healing relationships.

### ***Mindfulness Meditation***

Strengthens our ability to concentrate and monitor our negative thought processes, which creates healthy changes in the brain and balances our mood.

### ***Physical Exercise***

Boosts brain chemicals, which assist in making us feel rewarded and calm.

The behavioural therapies described above have been found to activate a healthy, long-acting, slow release of dopamine which is a necessity for stable mood and emotional health. They usually form the foundation of any successful drug or alcohol treatment programme.



## Why is behavioural therapy so effective in treating drug and alcohol addiction?

The reason 'behavioural' therapy is used so successfully to treat addiction is because although addiction is a biological illness, it will have caused us to develop certain ingrained personality traits, which function as coping mechanisms to face life with our addiction. That means we have become disordered in the way we *think*, feel and behave in response to the illness and events around us.

Simply abstaining from drugs or drinking won't leave us without symptoms. The symptoms will resume if we don't do something, but often we don't automatically *know* what to do. Whilst medicines can 'stop' or dampen the symptoms of addiction, learning new ways of thinking and behaving actually teaches the brain what to do, and the brain will get better and better at doing it. This process is called *brain plasticity* - in other words, the ability of the brain to change itself by *doing* different things.

According to **National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA)**,<sup>1</sup> effective drug and alcohol treatments include behavioural therapy and medication, or optimally, a combination of both. It's important to recognize that behavioural therapies differ in their approach and outcomes. These can include:

- Addressing a patient's motivation to change
- Identifying incentives to stop using drugs or alcohol
- Developing skills to resist drug use
- Incorporating constructive and rewarding activities to replace drug using activities
- Cultivating problem solving skills, and
- Establishing better personal relationships with family and friends

It's also essential to know what treatment model a drug or alcohol rehab uses before you make a decision to become an inpatient, specifically if you think you will need a medical detox as an initial stage in your recovery programme.

<sup>1</sup>NIDA (2011) <http://1.usa.gov/VgUoAQ> (retrieved 28/10/2012)



Some addiction treatment centres are able to offer supervised medical detoxes whilst others are not. They may support you if you are experiencing withdrawal symptoms, but many will not have the facilities or staff to facilitate a medical emergency.

Below you will find a list of some of the most common medications currently available to treat opioid, amphetamine and alcohol addictions:

- Methadone, buprenorphine (Subutex, Suboxone), and Naltrexone (including the long-acting formulation Vivitrol) are used to treat people addicted to opiates (e.g., heroin, prescription pain relievers);
- Users of amphetamines such as cocaine, methamphetamine, yaba, etc. are not generally prescribed medications during detox except in cases where psychosis may be present in heavy users. In this case anti-psychotic medications may be prescribed.
- Alcohol detoxification is best managed with the use of Benzodiazepines. The agent most commonly used in a medical detox is Chlordiazepoxide. After detox, drugs such as Acamprosate (Campral), Naltrexone, and Topiramate (Topamax) may be used for treating alcohol cravings and dependence.

Whilst medical detoxification is a necessary first step in the treatment of certain addictions, it's important to recognize detox alone does very little to change the patterns, behaviours and long term implications caused by long-term drug use.