

## What Is Substance Abuse?

The simplest definition of “substance abuse” is that a substance has control over your life. In the language of the American Medical Association, it is the “compulsive use of a substance resulting in physical, psychological, or social harm . . . and continued use despite that harm” (Rinaldi et al., 1988). The substance may become more important than your relationships, your work, and all else.

Substance abuse is widely considered a medical illness. It is not due to being “bad,” “lazy,” or “just wanting to have a good time.”

No one fully understands why some people become addicted and others don’t. It may be due to biology, terrible life experiences, or some combination. Whatever the cause, it is essential to learn how to overcome the illness. It can be done!

Some people are unsure whether they truly have a problem with substances, or they may hear conflicting opinions from others. It may be helpful to ask yourself whether either of the following formal definitions seems true for you.

### **DO YOU HAVE A PROBLEM WITH SUBSTANCE ABUSE?**

If you have a problem with substances, you have either *substance abuse* (a *mild* version of the disorder) or *substance dependence* (a *severe* version of the disorder). In popular language, “substance abuse” is used to refer to any problem with substances.

#### **Substance Abuse**

★ Check off (✓) any that are true for you, being *really* honest with yourself.

- Substance use that results in failure to fulfill obligations (e.g., work, parenting).
- Repeated substance use in situations that are physically dangerous (e.g., driving).
- Repeated legal problems resulting from substance use (e.g., disorderly conduct).
- Continued substance use despite repeated problems from it (e.g., arguments with people).

If any one above is true for you, you would be diagnosed with substance abuse.

#### **Substance Dependence**

★ Check off (✓) any that are true for you, being *really* honest with yourself.

- Q** Your **quantity** of substance use has increased.
- U** You are **unable to control** your substance use.
- I** Your substance use **interferes** with your responsibilities (e.g., home, work, parenting).
- T** Your **time** is heavily devoted to using the substance.
- N** You **need** more of the drug to obtain the same effect (“tolerance”).
- O** **Other aspects** of your life have been damaged by substance use (e.g., health, social life), but you continue to use.
- W** Physical **withdrawal** symptoms occur if you stop using the substance. Also, you may take the substance to try to manage your withdrawal symptoms.

If any three above are true for you, you would be diagnosed with substance dependence, which you can remember by the acronym “QUIT NOW.”

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