

## **What is addiction?**

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Addiction is a frequently heard and less understood term used in today's society. The word conjures up a different vision for nearly every person that hears it. From the skid row drunk to the wealthy cocaine addict to the suburban shop-a-holic, addiction is a way in which people have found to comfort themselves often at the expense of their bank account, their livelihood, their spouses, their children, their homes, and sometimes even their lives.

There has been a trend within society to differentiate between hard drugs and soft drugs in the last several years. Hard drugs are earmarked for cocaine, heroin, morphine, crystal meth, and some others that are closely related. The soft drugs include marijuana, LSD, mushrooms, ecstasy, and alcohol, to name a few.

There has been an increasing tendency for many people to merely disregard soft drug use in the wake of the current epidemic use of heroin, Oxycontin, crack, and the more recent increase of crystal meth use. There is unanimous agreement among people that those hard drugs are indeed hard drugs. However, to disregard or even minimize the use of other substances can and often does have devastating effects on the user. Many of the substances that 10-15 year olds start with are marijuana, alcohol, and ecstasy. These substances are the access point at which most people begin their journey into the world of substance use and abuse. The use of one drug does not necessarily mean that someone will try the next on the list but there is an increased risk in doing so if that person is already drinking and using other "soft" drugs. People are more likely to be exposed to someone using harder drugs if they are in an environment where there is any drug use at all. The exposure can come from an older sibling, a friend, a parent, a neighbor, etc.

There has been a dramatic increase in the last ten years of admissions to substance abuse treatment programs for *just* marijuana. Between 1990 and 2004 the rate of admissions to treatment programs in the state of Maine due to marijuana abuse increased from 539 to 2104. That's about a 400% increase. During that same time period, alcohol which has topped the list in Maine for many years increased from 7835 to 12778 (both statistics are from the Maine Office of Substance Abuse). While these numbers for alcohol are much larger, the rate of increase is about only 40%. This says that the use of marijuana as a primary reason for people entering treatment is as devastating as hard drugs which all have similar rates of use. These hard drugs are what most people use to identify an addict. Hopefully this article will help bring the picture of what you see as addiction into focus.

If you or someone you know is an alcoholic or an addict, contact a licensed alcohol and drug counselor ("LADC") for an assessment. They can then assist you in determining the most appropriate treatment options.

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