

# Common Myths About Alcohol and Drug Addiction

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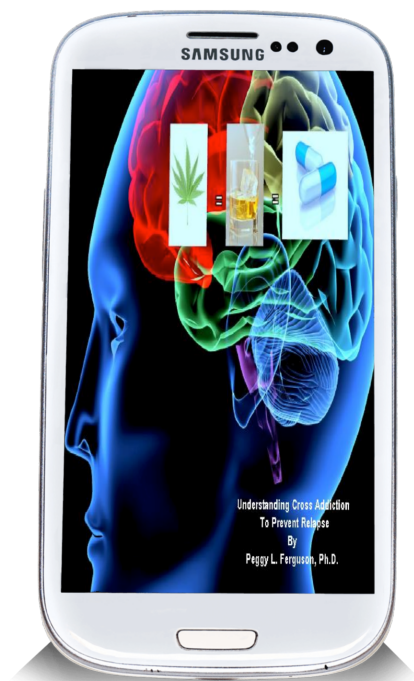
Misconceptions about alcohol and drug addiction are prevalent among those unfamiliar with the complexities of substance use disorder and those directly affected by it. Dispelling these myths is crucial to fostering empathy and understanding towards individuals grappling with this illness. Contrary to popular belief, labeling addiction as a "disease" does not absolve individuals of accountability for their actions. Below, common myths are presented in italics, followed by the corresponding truths in regular text.

- ***People with substance use disorder are societal outcasts and vagrants.*** Addiction does not discriminate based on social status; individuals from all walks of life can develop substance use disorders, including those who maintain employment.
- ***Addiction is merely a matter of choice and habit.*** While the initial decision to consume substances may be voluntary, addiction hijacks the brain's reward system, rendering subsequent substance use involuntary and compulsive.
- ***Those who have substance use disorder can quit at will if they genuinely want to.*** While the desire to quit is a crucial component of recovery, it is often insufficient on its own to overcome the powerful grip of addiction. Conceptualizing substance use disorder (and alcohol use disorder) on a continuum of severity may contribute to this confusion. Many people with an alcohol or substance use disorder of mild severity may be able to quit on their own. People who have a severe level (also referred to as addiction or dependence) usually need professional assistance.
- ***Addiction is a result of moral failings.*** Addiction is a neurobiological disorder, not a moral deficiency. Viewing it as such perpetuates stigma and hinders access to treatment and support.
- ***Willpower alone can control alcohol consumption.*** Once addiction takes hold, attempts to control drinking through sheer willpower are futile, as neurobiological changes in the brain compromise the individual's ability to exert consistent control over their substance use.
- ***Alcoholism is merely a symptom of underlying mental health issues.*** While co-occurring disorders are common among individuals with addiction, alcoholism is a primary illness with its own distinct characteristics and treatment approaches.
- ***Beer or weekend-only drinkers cannot have a severe alcohol use disorder.*** The type or frequency of alcohol consumption does not determine the presence of alcohol use disorder; instead, it is defined by the consequences and impact of drinking on one's life.

- ***Infrequent drinkers or those who do not experience cravings cannot have an alcohol use disorder.*** This illness is not contingent on daily consumption or constant cravings; it is characterized by the inability to control drinking despite adverse consequences.
- ***If one can temporarily stop drinking, they don't have an alcohol problem.*** Many individuals with alcohol use disorder may exhibit periods of controlled drinking, but these instances are often short-lived and do not signify sustained recovery.

The concept of alcohol use disorder as an illness is outdated. On the contrary, recent advancements in genetic and neuroscientific research have bolstered the understanding of addiction as a complex brain disorder, affirming the validity of the disease model. **Note: This article has been revised and edited from its original version, which was previously published in 2009 on this site. The content has been updated for contemporary language, clarity and accuracy.**

Understanding that addiction is a multifaceted illness, explained by neurochemistry and brain function. Cross addiction is a commonly reported phenomenon in the struggle for sustained recovery. Cross addiction is where someone with substance use disorders attempts to replace one mood-altering chemical with another only to find they have switched dependencies or relapsed on their "original drug of choice." Cross addiction highlights the influence of neurochemistry on how people consume alcohol and drugs and the difficulties they face in achieving sobriety. The brain's reward system, compromised by addiction, can predispose individuals to seek out alternative substances in pursuit of the same euphoric effects. In the journey toward recovery, equipping individuals with the knowledge and tools to navigate these complexities empowers them to forge a path toward lasting sobriety.



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