

Addiction and Stress

Addiction and stress often go hand in hand. For those who are dealing with high levels of stress in their daily lives, alcohol and drugs are often used to diminish the symptoms of stress, sometimes leading to substance abuse and addiction. People who have experienced trauma may take this to the extreme, using alcohol or drugs to dull anxiety, depression, and other chronic symptoms of traumatic stress, quickly becoming dependent on the substances to be able to feel good at all.

For this reason, it can be extremely important to include stress management therapies as part of treatment for substance abuse and continue them through recovery. However, not all treatment centers take this necessity into account, making it difficult to completely manage the causes of substance abuse in an individual's life and increasing the chance of relapse after treatment is over.

When stress is a factor in substance abuse, finding a treatment center that can help manage that stress can be a vital element in achieving recovery that will last for years to come.

Dealing with Stress

Stress is a fact of daily life for most people. Issues in relationships, jobs, traffic, and financial challenges are just some of the daily pressures that can result in feeling stressed. However, while most people have experienced stress, not everyone understands what happens when the body goes through the stress response.

As described by Medical News Today, stress is a physical and emotional response to a perceived danger. It evolved as a reaction to direct threats to life and health, at a time when survival was much more difficult, and these types of dangers were encountered daily. When a person perceives danger, the body releases chemicals that increase readiness to fight the threat or run from it. This readiness involves:

- Increased heart rate and breathing
- Dilated pupils
- Decreased digestion and immune system function
- Jumpiness and heightened awareness

When the stressor is gone, the body then releases more chemicals to counter this response, returning body function to normal.

These days, perceived danger takes on different forms. A person may have the same stress response to fear of losing a job that an ancestor may have had to encountering a large predator. Because today's perceived dangers are nearly constant, stress has become a chronic condition for a large number of people.

Stress and Substance Abuse

Many drugs and alcohol have chemical compounds in them that interact with the body's stress response system or that can otherwise moderate the symptoms of stress. According to Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences, this results in a large number of people who use drugs or alcohol when stressed to help overcome the disturbing symptoms that arise. Drugs that may be used in this way include:

- Alcohol
- Tranquilizers or benzodiazepines
- Opiate drugs
- Hallucinogens

The result of using these drugs can be a sense of diminished discomfort along with a euphoric feeling that makes the stress symptoms or the causes of stress feel less overwhelming.

The challenge is that with people experiencing stress on a daily basis, chronic alcohol or drug abuse may occur, increasing the risk that the person will develop a substance use disorder. Studies have demonstrated that people with higher levels of stress are more likely to have problems with chronic, heavy drug or alcohol use.

Treating Stress and Addiction Together

Because stress has such a strong effect on addiction, it is important that substance abuse treatment also involves therapies that help people learn to manage stress. To

this end, many of the therapies used in research-based addiction treatment programs include aspects of stress management. This includes:

- **Exercise:** Regular workouts can help people lower levels of anxiety. According to the Anxiety and Depression Association of America, exercise causes the body to produce endorphins, which act as natural painkillers and can lift mood, as well as improve quality of sleep. All of this can help ease stress. At the same time, these chemicals can help diminish cravings for drugs or alcohol, ease the discomforts of withdrawal, and develop a more positive outlook during and after treatment. All of this can help prevent relapse into substance use.
- **Meditation and mindfulness:** A research review from the Journal of the American Medical Association demonstrates that mindfulness meditation can result in lowered anxiety, depression, pain, and stress. At the same time, meditation can help a person remain calm in the face of substance use triggers, and soothe the feelings that lead to cravings.
- **Behavioral therapy:** Therapies that are practiced in addiction treatment, including Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) and other approaches, help a person learn to recognize behavior patterns and their typical responses to situations. By recognizing these patterns, an individual can then learn to modify the behavioral response. This is valuable both for managing stress and for avoiding substance use in the face of triggering events or situations. A specific branch of therapy, trauma-focused CBT, can help people with post-traumatic stress disorder work through the trauma issues that may lead to increased daily stress and substance abuse.
- **Peer support:** Peer support groups, such as 12-Step groups, are the basis of much of addiction treatment. These groups have been shown to promote accountability, motivation, and commitment, which improve a person's ability to avoid relapse into drug use. At the same time, peer support has been shown to decrease levels of perceived stress. A study from Social Science & Medicine

showed that people who had high job stress and low levels of peer support were likely to smoke cigarettes more than those who had lower stress and higher levels of support.

Who Can Treat Stress with Substance Abuse?

In a substance abuse treatment program, the managing physician or counselor for an individual client can recognize the need for stress treatment concurrent with substance abuse treatment during the intake process. The individual is examined and asked questions about health and stress so the individualized treatment plan can be formulated. If stress is a factor in the individual's substance abuse, the person overseeing treatment can incorporate various elements of the above therapies, along with other factors, to help the individual learn to manage stress as part of treatment. A psychiatrist or psychologist can provide direct treatment for stress management. However, this person can be aided by a physical trainer, yoga or meditation teacher, or other professionals who can provide instruction in the various therapies above.

When treatment for stress combines with substance abuse treatment, the result can be more positive, offering real solutions for managing one of the most common contributors to the development of addiction. A person who learns to manage stress is more likely to be able to manage the triggers and cravings for substance abuse, getting more out of treatment to maintain recovery and avoid relapse to substance use in the future.

Excerpt

Treatment Centers for Addiction and Stress