

Myths of Addiction

Old Ideas

Since so much of our scientific understanding of addiction is relatively new, and since so much about drug and alcohol use is tied up in belief systems, it's not surprising that myths about this disease still are alive and well in many communities.

"There are two main misconceptions that really drive me crazy when it comes to addictions," says Kathleen Brady, M.D., professor at the Medical University of South Carolina. "One of them is this whole idea that an individual needs to reach rock bottom before they can get any help. That is absolutely wrong. There is no evidence that that's true. In fact, quite the contrary. The earlier in the addiction process that you can intervene and get someone help, the more they have to live for. The more they have to get better for."

The other big myth, says Nora Volkow, M.D., director of the National Institute on Drug Abuse, is that you have to want to be treated in order to get better. Addicted people may be pushed to enter a treatment program by an employer, a companion or the criminal justice system. In fact, research has shown that the outcomes for those who are legally mandated to enter treatment can be as good as the outcomes for those who entered treatment voluntarily.

Myths About Addiction*

** Adapted from *Myths of Addiction*. Carlton K. Erickson, Ph.D., University of Texas Addiction Science*

1. Addicts are bad, crazy, or stupid.

Evolving research is demonstrating that addicts are not bad people who need to get good, crazy people who need to get sane, or stupid people who need education. Addicts have a brain disease that goes beyond their use of drugs.

2. Addiction is a willpower problem.

This is an old belief, probably based upon wanting to blame addicts for using drugs to excess. This myth is reinforced by the observation that most treatments for alcoholism and addiction are behavioral (talk) therapies, which are perceived to build self-control. But addiction occurs in an area of the brain called the mesolimbic dopamine system that is not under conscious control.

3. Addicts should be punished, not treated, for using drugs.

Science is demonstrating that addicts have a brain disease that causes them to have impaired control over their use of drugs. Addicts need treatment for their neurochemically driven brain pathology.

4. People addicted to one drug are addicted to all drugs.

While this sometimes occurs, most people who are dependent on a drug may be dependent on one or two drugs, but not all. This is probably due to how each drug "matches up" with the person's brain chemistry.

5. Addicts cannot be treated with medications.

Actually, addicts are medically detoxified in hospitals, when appropriate, all the time. But can they be treated with medications after detox? New pharmacotherapies (medicines) are being developed to help patients who have already become abstinent to further curb their craving for addicting drugs. These medications reduce the chances of relapse and enhance the effectiveness of existing behavioral (talk) therapies.

6. Addiction is treated behaviorally, so it must be a behavioral problem.

New brain scan studies are showing that behavioral treatments (i.e., psychotherapy) and medications work similarly in changing brain function. So addiction is a brain disease that can be treated by changing brain function, through several types of treatments.

7. Alcoholics can stop drinking simply by attending AA meetings, so they can't have a brain disease.

The key word here is "simply." For most people, AA is a tough, lifelong working of the Twelve Steps. On the basis of research, we know that this support system of people with a common experience is one of the active ingredients of recovery in AA. AA doesn't work for everyone, even for many people who truly want to stop drinking.