

# The connection between stress and substance abuse



**There is a strong link between stress and substance abuse. Everyone copes with stress in different ways, but some people may resort to using drugs or alcohol to manage their stress. Conversely, the impact of substance misuse on a person's health, life, and relationships may cause excess stress.**

Our guide will explain the link between stress and substance abuse, provide tips of managing stress in healthy ways, and discuss how to get help if you or a loved one is struggling with an addiction to drugs and alcohol.

## Can Stress Cause Addiction?

There is no single cause of addiction. Rather a substance use disorder — the clinical term for addiction — is the result of the complex interplay of several risk factors including a person's genetics, environment, and life experiences. If you experience chronic stress in your life, this may also be a contributing risk factor.

Nearly everyone experiences stress from time to time. Stress responses developed to motivate early humans to protect themselves from threats in their environment. While we aren't facing down predators today, our natural stress responses can still be sometimes beneficial and even

enhance our ability to accomplish tasks and solve problems.

Chronic stress, which is long-lasting and goes on for an extended period of time, can take a heavy toll on your mental and physical health. Stress can affect nearly every system in your body. Prolonged stress can increase the chances of developing a mental health disorder, like anxiety or depression, and lead to the onset of chronic headaches, cardiovascular disease, or obesity. An individual suffering from chronic stress, and who lacks healthy coping mechanisms, may turn to drugs or alcohol as a method of managing it.



## **How Does Substance Use Affect Stress?**

There is a two-way relationship between stress and substance use. Yes, chronic stress may lead individuals to use substances to cope, but alcohol and drug use can also contribute to stress. The use of drugs or alcohol itself can also negatively impact our ability to manage stress.

The prolonged use of drugs or alcohol is associated with certain changes in areas of the brain related to being responsible for impulse control, motivation, pleasure, and behaviour. Over time, these changes can make it extremely difficult for someone to stop using substances, even when they want to, despite negative consequences to their life and health. The negative consequences of one's substance use, which may include economic instability, job loss, relationship strain, and medical or psychological health problems, can significantly increase one's overall stress levels.

Additionally, if someone attempts to cut back or stop using alcohol or drugs, they may experience uncomfortable symptoms known as withdrawal. Withdrawal is an experience that can be incredibly stressful, both physically and psychologically, and is associated with strong cravings. In order to alleviate their symptoms and cravings, someone going through withdrawal may relapse back to drug or alcohol use.

## Tips for Managing Stress

Learning to manage stress in healthy ways can be incredibly beneficial for the mind and body. Some helpful stress management techniques include:

- **Reach out for help from other people.** Positive and supportive relationships can help buffer the effects of stress. Reaching out to family or friends, joining a support group, or getting help from a therapist can help minimize your stress.
- **Practice meditation or mindfulness.** Studies show that participating in meditation programmes can help reduce stress and improve your health. Even if you do not have time for a meditation programme, you can still reap the benefits of a few moments of mindfulness, the practice of focusing on the present moment. Taking some time to count your breaths is a simple way to practice mindfulness.
- **Practice healthy habits.** When you experience stress, getting enough sleep and eating well may be the last thing on your mind. However, if you are chronically tired and not properly nourished, you might not have the internal resources to handle stress. Eating a balanced diet and getting a good night's rest can help you cope with stressful situations as they arise.
- **Get some exercise.** Exercise provides many physical and emotional benefits, including helping people handle stress better. Any purposeful movement, such as walking, biking, hiking, yoga, weight training, or team sports, can be a helpful stress-reliever.
- **Spend time in nature.** Research has found that spending time outdoors can boost your mood and help reduce stress. Whether you take a quiet stroll in your neighborhood, go for a long hike, or sit on a bench and listen to the birds, spending time in nature can help you relax and reset.



**If you feel you need help with dealing with stress or overcoming substance abuse, Platinum Health is there to assist you.**

**EAP Counselors (010 133 0525) are available 24 hours per day, 7 days per week, to offer counselling and support. You are also welcome to book an appointment with PH's Mental Health Services (014 590 1700 or 080 000 6942).**

**Source: [xfortreatment.com/substance-abuse/co-occurring-disorders/stress/](http://xfortreatment.com/substance-abuse/co-occurring-disorders/stress/)**



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