Understanding Addiction

Addiction is the continued use of alcohol and other drugs even when that use is causing harm. Addiction is a disease of mind, body, and spirit. It is a physical and psychological craving or compulsion to use a mood-altering substance.

The disease concept of addiction means that addiction is a primary disease—it’s not the result of some other problem. For example, a bad marriage or boss or teacher didn’t cause the problem. Addiction is also progressive (if it continues, it will get worse), chronic (there is no cure for it, but it can be managed), and can be fatal (if it continues unchecked, it will cause death).

What are the symptoms of addiction?
Addiction leads to consequences in some or all of these areas of life: social, emotional, financial, legal, health, employment, family, and school. Problems in these areas can be symptoms of the disease of addiction. Other major warning signs include craving for the substance, increase in tolerance, preoccupation with the substance, loss of control, blackouts, and all forms of denial: blame, excuses, rationalization, and minimization.

Are some people genetically prone to addiction?
Research has shown that addiction is not a matter of an individual’s strength, moral character, or willpower. Instead it can be attributed to the way an individual’s brain is “wired.” Powerful, naturally occurring chemicals called neurotransmitters control our brain’s activities, carrying messages between neurons. When people use alcohol and/or other drugs, the bloodstream quickly carries these intoxicating chemicals to the brain. In the brain, complex chemical reactions ensue that can distort reality. This causes a feeling of intoxication or “high.” Some people find this feeling pleasurable and worth repeating—those people often become addicted. Other people find getting high an unpleasant experience and, as a result, seldom use alcohol and other drugs.

Why can’t some people stop using alcohol and other drugs?
Most people suffering from the disease of addiction can’t stop using, even when they are faced with losing everything: their job, their family, even their life. The mind and body react addictively to alcohol and other drugs, and they simply cannot control that fact. They are powerless against these substances.

Here’s a great example. As soon as an addict heads for a bar, the brain begins making dopamine. The person has already begun the process of relapse before even touching the alcohol. The person’s body and brain chemistry are such that the mere thought of alcohol or other drugs starts the dopamine snowball effect that could lead to not just one drink, but five, ten, or twenty. The brain doesn’t know the difference between imagining taking a drink and actually taking one. It reacts the same way—it wants more.

This is why Step One in Twelve Step Programs is so important: “We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable.”
Remember:

- Addicted people didn’t cause the disease. Their brain chemistry is such that they can’t use alcohol and other drugs as other people do. Their addicted brains can’t quit once they start using.
- Addicted people can’t control or cure the disease, but they can manage it by working the Twelve Steps, taking advantage of recovery support systems, and developing healthy spirituality.

It’s not easy to accept the idea of powerlessness. But it’s the first step to recovery. Once your loved one accepts the disease, he or she can then get down to the work of recovery.

How can you help your loved one maintain an ongoing recovery?
After working hard in early recovery, now it’s time for your loved one to protect and plan for an ongoing recovery. Ultimately it’s up to each of us to work our own recovery. But you can offer support by helping your loved one remember to work the Twelve Steps, utilize a sponsor and sober friends for support, and go to Twelve Step meetings. These practices have been proven to help recovering people develop and maintain a healthy, happy outlook and enjoy the freedom and peace of sobriety.

The Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous
1. We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable.
2. Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.
4. Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.
5. Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.
6. Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.
7. Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.
8. Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.
9. Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.
10. Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.
11. Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood Him, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.
12. Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all our affairs.