



Avoiding self-medication: Tackling root causes of personal issues

We all self-medicate or try treating our stress or physical discomfort by ourselves, whether it's taking over-the-counter medication to ease a headache or enjoying a glass of wine after a particularly stressful day. However, when we regularly use alcohol, drugs (prescribed or otherwise) or certain behaviors, such as gambling, to deal with life's challenges, we run the risk of abuse and addiction.

Self-medication can provide temporary relief but over time can actually mask and worsen the underlying problems. The most common reasons people self-medicate are:

- **Chronic pain.** Effective pain management can be difficult and opiates are often the only option. While effective, they are also highly addictive and increasingly restricted. Research has shown that 87 percent of people who abuse prescription or illicit drugs did so to deal with their chronic pain.
- **Mental health issues.** The stress brought on by treated or untreated mental health issues, particularly depression, anxiety and PTSD, may lead individuals to self-medicate.
- **Stress.** Individuals with poor coping skills are more likely self-medicate with alcohol, drugs, food or potentially destructive behaviors.
- **Sleep disorders.** Some people believe that alcohol helps relax them but in fact alcohol disrupts sleep patterns and reduces the quality of sleep. And while sedatives are often prescribed to help with temporary insomnia, they can lead to dependence and abuse.

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Signs to watch for

No one's perfect and everyone will soothe their occasional physical or emotional pain in an unhealthy way but continual self-medication can quickly become a problem. Here are some signs to watch for:

- Turning to alcohol, drugs or certain behaviors whenever you feel stressed.
- Becoming panicky, irritable or angry when you're unable to ease your symptoms.
- Using prescription medication in larger amounts, in different ways or for longer than advised by your doctor.
- Using medication not prescribed by your healthcare team.
- Wanting to stop but are consistently unsuccessful.
- Your mental or physical issues continue.
- You start to experience other problems. These can include:
 - Difficulties at work
 - Financial struggles
 - Relationship problems
 - Increased anxiety, depression and other mental health symptoms
 - Physical health problems

Addressing the underlying issues of emotional or physical discomfort is the key to avoiding the dangers of self-medication – and to recovery. If you'd like more information on substance abuse, mental health issues or resources available to you, access your Employee Assistance Program (EAP).

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Tips to cope with bad news overload

Thanks to social media, mobile devices and 24-hour news stations, we seem to be bombarded with bad news from around the world – natural disasters, political turmoil, terrorism and war. It's no wonder many of us are feeling stressed. And when traumatic or difficult events happen in our own lives -- job losses, relationship issues, the loss of loved ones, financial problems – we can feel completely overwhelmed.

A constant barrage of stressful events can make us feel:

- Anxious
- Frightened
- Restless
- Sad or depressed
- Irritable or angry

They can cause:

- Fatigue
- Headaches
- Gastrointestinal issues
- Increased heart rate and blood pressure
- Sleep problems
- Unhealthy coping strategies such as overeating, drug or alcohol abuse, and social withdrawal

Coping with bad news

While we can't control what happens around us, we can control how we react to them. Try the following:

- **Adjust your thoughts.** Losing your job or ending a relationship can be devastating but try not to look at the situation as the end of a certain chapter of your life, but the beginning of a new one, filled with possibility.
- **Limit your exposure to the news.** Everyone has their own level of tolerance for stress so we each have to judge for ourselves when enough is enough. Try to set certain times of the day to catch up on news or log onto social media.
- **Maintain a healthy lifestyle.** A healthy diet, exercise and plenty of sleep keep our bodies and minds ready to cope with whatever life throws our way.
- **Stop and breathe.** Do whatever works for you – a long walk, a vigorous workout, meditation, listening to music or playing with the kids.
- **Laugh.** Laughter triggers the release of endorphins that give us a sense of wellbeing. It's hard to feel angry, anxious, or sad when you're laughing.

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- **Rely on your support network.** Discuss your concerns with family members, friends, trusted colleagues or neighbors. People who care about you will provide perspective, sound advice and practical help that can get you through tough times.

If you're feeling unable to cope with what's going on in the world or your life, contact your **EAP** for more information, resources and support.

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