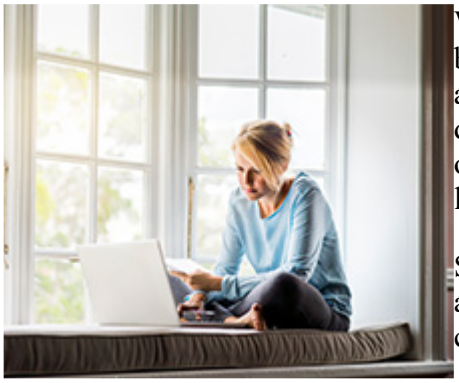
Your Employee and Family Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

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 behaviours, 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 behaviours.
- **Sleep disorders.** Some people believe that alcohol helps them relax, but in fact alcohol disrupts sleep patterns and reduces the quality of sleep. While sedatives are often prescribed to help with temporary insomnia, they can lead to dependence and abuse.

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 behaviours 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, contact us.

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