



WELLNESS CONNECTION

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HEALTHY HARMONY - Addiction and the Brain

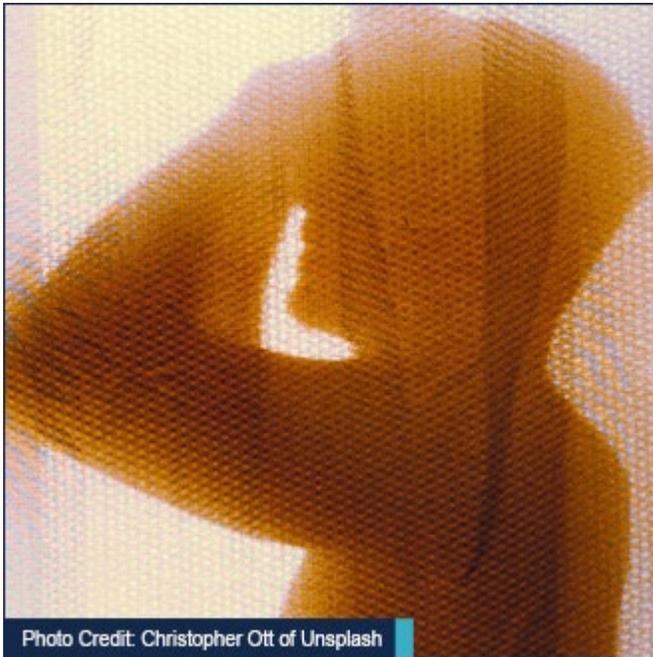


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By Jackie Billhymer

September calls attention to addiction by being recognized as National Recovery Month. Addiction can be connected to a particular substance, thing, or activity. A person can be addicted to drugs, alcohol, shopping, food, or technology, to name a few. Addiction can become a destructive force in life and affect not only the addict, but also their family, friends, and the community.

There is a biological element to how drugs and alcohol affect our normal brain function.

The human brain uses a pleasure/reward system to motivate us to repeat behaviors that

make us feel good. When you exercise, your body releases dopamine and endorphins in your brain to make you feel good. The more you exercise, the better you feel, which motivates you to continue healthy behavior.

The problem with addiction is that the brain's natural pleasure/reward process works the same way with drugs, alcohol, shopping, or food. These things can temporarily make you feel good and motivate you to want more. A vicious cycle can ensue when you only feel good when you repeat the unhealthy behavior. Over time, drugs and alcohol specifically can cause damage to the decision-making center of your brain and threaten your ability to make decisions towards recovery.

It can be difficult to identify the signs of someone battling addiction. We often want to see the people we care about in the best light possible and this can prevent us from being able to recognize if they are struggling with substance abuse or addiction. According to the [National Institutes of Health](#), warning signs of addiction may include:

- Difficulty sleeping
- Anxiety or depression
- Memory problems
- Mood swings (e.g., temper flare-ups, irritability, defensiveness)
- A person not seeming like themselves (e.g., changes in their level of interest in life or being overly energetic)
- Increased changes in the amount of medication needed or frequency of refills
- “Doctor shopping,” (e.g., moving from one provider and/or to another in order to get multiple prescriptions for the same medicine)

If you, or someone you know, is struggling with addiction of any kind, it is important to get help. You can find information about the State of Illinois and University employee assistance programs on the [System HR website](#) and the [Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration \(SAMHSA\)](#) has a national helpline, along with many other resources for finding treatment options.

