Dear Alice,

My uncle shoots heroin. My father used to do cocaine. My moms’ (both of them) used to smoke weed with their friends when I was eight. I smoked weed when I was twelve. I sold weed at 14.

I don't want to continue in the vein of my addictive family (no pun intended). How hereditary is addiction? What measures can I take to avoid falling into the same hazy trap of my family members?

Muchas gracias,
Cubano

Answer

Dear Cubano,

What an incredibly proactive step you’ve taken by asking these critical questions! Indeed, research does show that genetics play a role in the development of addiction, but other variables, such as age, environment, lifestyle, and mental health status may be equally vital in determining susceptibility to addiction. Even if someone is genetically predisposed to addiction, it doesn’t mean that they will become addicted. In fact, many people who struggle with addiction have no family history or genetic predisposition at all. There’s no way to predict whether a person will become addicted to a substance, nor a perfect strategy to prevent substance abuse. However, there are many ways to foster a lower-risk lifestyle — even if your family members struggle with drug and alcohol dependence themselves. Keep reading for more information on variables that may contribute to addiction, as well as strategies for a lifestyle free of substance abuse.

Drugs and alcohol affect each person’s body differently, but estimates show that children of parents with addictions are more likely to develop a problematic relationship with substances compared to others. One potential explanation for their increased risk comes from the field of epigenetics, the study of the change in deoxyribonucleic acid (DNA) structure that results from responses to the environment. Put more simply, the environment a person is in can cause the structure of DNA to change at the cell level. This can leave markers on the DNA that are then passed on to children. For example, a person who uses cocaine may be altering the expression
of their DNA to create more proteins that are associated with addiction. This altered DNA could be passed to their children, which may make them more susceptible to addiction in the future as their DNA could also have the markers to create more proteins. Not only does the environment have an ability to affect the genes that are expressed and passed on to others, it can also play a role in drug use and addiction due to the influences a person receives. Since these genes may make it easier or harder for a person to respond to their environment, they can also play a role in whether or not a person experiences addiction.

Even if you’ve inherited addiction-related gene expressions from your relatives, there are still measures you can take to reduce the risk of substance abuse, one of which is avoiding addictive substances altogether. Abstaining from taking any illegal drugs, including prescription pills that aren’t prescribed to you, may be worth considering. If you’re taking any potentially addictive prescription medications (such as painkillers and benzodiazepines), you may choose to consult with your health care provider about your concerns. Additionally, consuming alcohol in moderation — up to one or two drinks per day based on sex assigned at birth — or abstaining from alcohol completely may be helpful steps to avoid addiction. If you’re currently using drugs and are concerned about becoming addicted, you may consider seeking treatment sooner rather than later.

In addition to practicing abstinence, there are several other steps those interested in or concerned about addiction can take to both educate and take care of themselves. Consulting with a mental health professional may allow you to connect with someone with whom you feel comfortable talking. They'll likely be able to help address your emotional, psychosomatic (emotional or cognitive symptoms that cause physical or physiological effects), and behavioral concerns related to substance use and addiction. There are many programs and support groups for individuals and families struggling with addiction, and with the help of a mental health professional, you can decide which one may be most appropriate for you. You can also research some on your own by exploring the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration’s substance abuse treatment facility locator. While financial concerns may make the process feel daunting, many states and cities do offer free drug and alcohol treatment.

In addition to seeking mental health counseling or other resources, you may consider the following:

- Plan ahead in order to avoid triggers and steer clear of situations or places in which you know you’ll be exposed to drugs or alcohol. This may involve spending time apart from your family, especially when they’re using.
- Try not to let anxieties about blending in take precedence over your choice to use or not use. It can be helpful to remind yourself that you’re not obligated to justify your reasoning for refusing drugs or alcohol.
- Make time for yourself. Identify a relaxing activity that makes you feel good, such as physical activity or meditation, and engage in it regularly. This may involve exploring new hobbies and interests.
- If this is something you’re struggling with, try distracting yourself to reduce tension or temptation. Call up a trusted friend, get fresh air, watch a movie, or run some errands — staying occupied may help take your mind off drugs and alcohol.
Lastly, perhaps one of the most critical things you can do — and something that can be done with minimal resources — is to identify people in your community, including trusted family, friends, peers or mentors, and support groups who can support you through this process. Having a support network that shares your desire to avoid substance abuse can help you avoid negative peer pressure and promote a healthier lifestyle. You may also find it helpful to find other people that are looking for a substance-free lifestyle. Check out Am I a dork for not being a party animal? for more information on making friends that also don't use substances.

Good luck!

Alice!

Category:
Alcohol & Other Drugs
Helping & Getting Help

Related questions
Strategies for preventing drunk driving
Marijuana addiction?
Help for gambling addiction

Resources
Counseling and Psychological Services (CPS) (Morningside)
Columbia Health BASICS program (Morningside)
Medical Services (Morningside)
Mental Health Services (CUIMC)
Student Health Service BASICS program (CUIMC)
Addiction Information & Management Strategies (AIMS) (CUIMC)
Medical Services (CUIMC)

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