

# **Cross-Addiction: The Complex Web of Addiction**

**By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.**

Early recovery from addiction is a delicate period filled with challenges and potential pitfalls. Cross-addiction is one of the most significant factors leading to relapse. In simple terms, cross-addiction means that if a person with substance use disorder is addicted to one mood-altering substance, such as alcohol, they risk developing dependence on other substances that alter their mood and mind. To truly grasp the concept of cross-addiction, we must delve into the nature of addiction and the effects of mood-altering drugs on the human mind.

Understanding Addiction as a Disease:

Addiction is now widely recognized as a primary, chronic, progressive, and relapsing condition. Extensive research over the last several decades has revealed that addiction fundamentally affects the brain. Although the initial decision to use a substance may be voluntary, the changes in the brain over time are far from a conscious choice. Addiction "hijacks" the neural pathways in the brain, resulting in thinking and feeling distortions that compel individuals to continue using drugs despite the negative consequences. This observation has become an integral part of the accepted definition of addiction.

Commonalities Among Different Addictions:

The brain changes induced by addiction are common to different types of drug and certain behavioral addictions, including gambling, overeating, and sex. Biological, psychological, and social factors influence the development, maintenance, and recovery. Specific individuals may be more predisposed to addiction due to genetic factors, becoming "hardwired" for addiction from their first exposure to any mood-altering substance. The allure of mood-altering drugs lies in their ability to affect

one's emotions, thoughts, and behavior. People become addicted to the mood-altering effects these drugs produce.

#### The Ever-Changing Nature of Drug Choice:

Each individual selects a particular drug based on their unique needs at a given time. As those needs evolve, so too may the drug of choice. Moreover, the effects of a drug on the body can change over time. Other factors, including availability, social acceptance, perceived lack of negative consequences, and cost, often influence an addict's decision-making process regarding drug selection, sometimes on a conscious or subconscious level.

#### Self-Reinforcing Nature of Mood-Altering Drugs:

Mood-altering drugs, working within the altered neural pathways of the brain, provide self-reinforcement in various ways. They meet the specific needs of individuals, such as relaxation or numbing of emotions, reducing inhibitions, and more. These drugs help sustain the compulsion to use them. Over time, individuals rely on their chosen substances to meet their needs, preventing the development of alternative coping skills. For example, someone struggling with anxiety may depend on a drug with anxiety-reducing properties because they lack effective anxiety management techniques. When stress and anxiety levels exceed a threshold, the individual will seek relief through a pharmaceutical solution, regardless of whether it's their primary drug or a substitute. The default position of seeking a chemical solution highlights the importance of identifying the roles that substances play in a person's life during recovery and developing healthy living skills to replace them.

#### The Fallacy of Switching Drugs:

When a person in recovery acknowledges the problems associated with their primary drug of choice and believes they can safely transition to a different drug, they fail to consider that the "new drug" will similarly operate in their brain as the "old drug." By substituting one substance for another, the individual remains in an active state of addiction; they are not genuinely abstinent. The addicted brain undergoes qualitative changes,

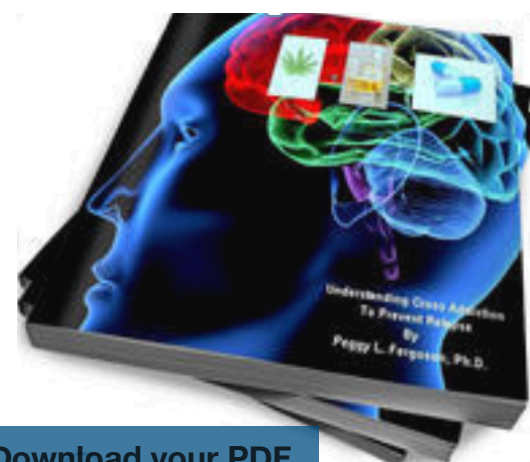
and altering the drug of choice does not restore a non-addicted state. The negative consequences of drug use persist, and one cannot regain lasting control over substance use by simply changing drugs.

### The Illusion of Control:

During the journey to regain control over their lives, many individuals chasing an illusory sense of control convince themselves that the latest attempt (switching drugs) will yield lasting results, re-establishing control. However, this is a misconception. Over time it becomes obvious that such attempts are only temporary fixes, and the cycle of addiction continues, often in a shorter span than anticipated.

Cross-addiction reveals the intricate web of addiction and its complex impact on individuals. Understanding the nature of addiction as a disease that alters the brain's functioning is crucial. Recognizing that any mood-altering substance holds the potential for addiction and that changing drugs of choice does not lead to true recovery is vital for individuals on the path to healing. By developing alternative coping skills and seeking comprehensive support, those struggling with addiction can increase their chances of long-term recovery and break free from the destructive cycle of cross-addiction.

Take control of your recovery journey with our ultimate guide to preventing relapse! "Understanding Cross-Addiction to Prevent Relapse" is your go-to resource for tackling the specific challenges of cross-addiction. Discover the true nature of addiction, learn how cross-addiction can lead to relapse, and unlock powerful strategies for staying on track. Plus, get access to a valuable worksheet designed to assist you in your relapse prevention efforts. Don't let cross-addiction derail your progress. Get your hands on this essential guide now and take charge of your recovery!



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