

# **Breaking the Cycle of Addiction: Watch Out for Cross-Addiction**

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

Addiction is a complex disorder affecting millions worldwide. Compulsive use of a chemical despite the negative consequences of using that chemical characterizes addiction. Substance use affects the brain and how it functions, leading to changes in behavior, thought patterns, and decision-making abilities. The transition from substance use to addiction is associated with changes in brain circuitry, including those involved with conditioning, reward sensitivity, incentive motivation, self-monitoring/regulation, mood, and affective identification and management. Addiction is present when individuals cannot withstand the strong urge to take the drug despite knowing its potentially catastrophic consequences. Addiction involves uncontrollable patterns of substance use or addictive behaviors.

Some psychological factors that drive and maintain addiction include the impaired ability to control or regulate their emotional responses to a trigger, impulsivity, stress, and impaired coping mechanisms. Inadequate capacity to self-regulate and manage emotions includes discomfort and intolerance of emotions, misidentification of, mismanagement of, or inappropriate expression of anger, anxiety, fear, sadness, or lack of emotional expression. This impairment in the ability to deal with feelings creates a need for relief. When substance abuse is available for comfort, relapse is a significant risk. Impulsive people are more likely to engage in substance use and addictive behaviors.

Unmanaged chronic stress also contributes to the development and maintenance of an addiction. Chronic stress challenges the limits of a person's coping skills and leads to overwhelm, difficulty with self-regulation, impulsivity, and a compulsive desire for relief. Without

adequate coping skills, mood-altering substances or behaviors are likely to be used to manage stress, emotions, and other challenges in life.

Individuals addicted to one substance or behavior are more likely to develop an addiction to another, often unrelated, substance or behavior. Cross-addiction, a common phenomenon in addiction, refers to the development of other unhealthy compulsions. Cross-addiction can involve compulsive use of multiple chemicals or behaviors simultaneously, serial addictions over time, or complete abstinence followed by relapse on a different drug. A relapse with one mood-altering drug can create a cascade of relapse behaviors. You might even be clean and sober for years and then engage in conduct that becomes compulsive because it lights up the brain's dopamine reward center.

Cross-addiction is a severe hazard to recovery, even when it involves addictive behavior. A typical example of the seriousness of cross-addiction is when an alcoholic gets sober, gains a lot of weight by cross-addicting to food, has weight loss surgery, and goes back to drinking when denied food relief.

Cross addictions can include addictions to food, gambling, sex, gaming, or other compulsive behaviors. All of these can involve dopamine rewards to the brain. The exact neurochemical factors at play in addiction apply to cross-addiction. Cross-addiction is more than one addiction. Similarly, some critical psychological components contributing to cross-addiction include impulsivity, stress, and co-occurring mental health problems. Depression, anxiety, attention deficit disorder, and other mental health problems co-occur with addiction. When other mental health symptoms remain during or after addiction treatment, there is a tendency to fall back on old default programming--mood-altering drugs or behavior as the solution. Early recovery is especially vulnerable to relapse. The newly sober person may not yet have developed crucial living skills. Cross-addiction is one of the most common examples of early recovery relapse. Cravings are a hallmark of early recovery. Impulsivity can contribute to the difficulty in withstanding those cravings. Mood-altering drugs provide

immediate but temporary relief to cravings by drugging feelings, thoughts, and behavior. They allow you to distort, escape, or ignore your reality.

Unmanaged emotions and discomfort, such as stress, anxiety, fear, and sadness, can trigger cravings for addictive substances or behaviors. Chronic stress can contribute to many people's difficulty identifying, managing, and expressing emotions. A desire to seek relief through drugs (including alcohol) occurs, and impulsivity makes it more difficult to control cravings and impulses. Defense mechanisms make it more comfortable psychologically to shift their addiction from one substance or behavior to another.

Mood-altering drugs and behavior are waiting in the wings. Coping mechanisms must replace mood-altering chemicals and behaviors in addiction recovery. Self-care behavior such as exercise, nutrition, adequate sleep and rest, and social support systems are crucial in managing stress and mental health symptoms such as anxiety and depression. Therapy can help individuals understand the significance of not falling prey to cross-addiction, learning and practicing craving management techniques, and neutralizing defense mechanisms that get in the way of recovery. Armed with a toolbox of new recovery skills, a support system of seasoned addiction recovery veterans, and various recovery resources to build recovery capital, the newly sober person can avoid cross-addiction.



**Understanding Cross Addiction To Prevent Relapse**  
by Peggy L. Ferguson Ph.D.

A simple guide for the professional and the general information seeker. This relapse prevention guide, specific to cross addiction issues covers explanations of the nature of addiction and cross addiction, examples of how cross addiction leads to relapse, and includes a **worksheet** to assist in relapse prevention. [PDF file format. \\$9.95](#)

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