

## Is Addiction Really a Chronic Disease?

A growing number of treatment professionals have bought into the widely accepted theory that addiction is a chronic disease that gets progressively worse without treatment, much like hypertension, asthma, or diabetes. This complex, well-researched school of thought is based largely on the theory that addiction significantly changes the chemical makeup of the brain.

The National Institute for Drug Abuse, (NIDA), notes that like other chronic diseases, an addicted person has a huge responsibility for maintenance of the illness through lifestyle changes and addiction treatment, much like a person with diabetes must check blood sugar frequently, take medications and adhere to a specific diet; or like a heart attack victim who must exercise and maintain a healthy diet to stay healthy.

Although the disease model has many proponents, it isn't without opponents who strongly believe that addiction is not a chronic illness, and that labeling substance abuse as a disease takes control and personal power away from the addicted person. Many reason that the brain has a tremendous ability to adapt and change, becoming stronger or weaker depending on how it is used. Some reason that many addicted people make a conscious decision to stop using – sometimes even without treatment or rehab.

Those who adhere to the disease model are quick to recall the bad old days not all that long ago, when society believed that a substance abuse problem was caused by a weak will, lack of character or a moral failing. Because addiction was shrouded in fear and shame, many addicts suffered in silence rather than taking substantial risks involved in seeking desperately needed treatment or entering rehab. The move to the disease concept has gradually changed the way people think and has removed much of the stereotypes that keep people trapped.

On the other hand, addicts who believe they have a chronic disease may give up on the idea they can get well, believing that maintenance of the illness demands endless meetings or counseling sessions, a lifetime of constant struggle and the ever-present danger of backsliding.

We consider addiction a biological brain disease. However, addiction treatment requires a highly individualized approach and addiction can't be explained away with predictable, one-size-fits-all answers. Of course, personal will and commitment are critical factors. Matching treatment settings and services to a client's specific needs is key to ultimate success in drug rehab. The earlier treatment is offered, the greater the chance of a positive outcome.