

Myth 2: Addicts made the wrong choice, it is their fault

Nobody decides to get addicted on drugs out of their own free will. Even starting to experiment with, or continue to use, drugs is something that does not happen only because one likes it. As we hope it becomes clear from the paragraphs below, there are multiple factors that increase the likelihood of someone to start use drugs or to develop substance use disorders. These factors are out of the control of individual. Nobody chooses to be born in a dysfunctional family or in a poor community. Also, it is good to remember that all drug use will not lead to dependence and other disorders. The risk of developing dependence is also affected by individual as well as environmental factors.

Which kind of environmental factors can increase the vulnerability towards starting to use drugs?

- Lack of a strong loving bond between children and the adults that take care of them - it could be parents, but it could be other relatives or foster parents too.
- Major changes in life such as moving to a new town or school, divorce of parents or death of a family member.
- Poor quality of early education, negative school climate and poor attachment to school, poor or no school attendance and academic performance, lack of evidence-based health education and prevention programs at school.
- Easy access to alcohol, tobacco or other drugs.
- Social norms that are okay with or even promote drug use within friends, peers or family.
- Growing up in marginalized and deprived communities characterised by poverty, homelessness, conflict or war, lack of safety, violence or antisocial norms, social exclusion, and discrimination within society.

What kind of individual level factors can influence someone to start using drugs?

- Personal characteristics and temperament traits, such as sensation seeking, aggressiveness or impulsive behaviour.
- Mental health issues such as high anxiety or depression.
- Poor emotional and personal skills, such as not being able to regulate own emotions or recognise emotions in others or cope with stressful situations
- Insufficient decision making and problem solving skills.
- Belief that the majority of peers are already experimenting with or using substances and the perception that use of substances is not risky.

Are these factors of vulnerability within the control of the individual, especially of a child or a youth?

Different factors of vulnerability are linked to each other. They make each other stronger and they contribute to make somebody more or less vulnerable starting to use drugs and/or develop dependence.

Does the age in which you start make a difference?

- Yes. The brain keeps on developing throughout childhood and until the early 20s. The earlier you start using, the more likely the use will interfere with your brain development, especially of the development of the higher cognitive functions such as problem solving, planning and other abstract thinking, and the more likely it is that you will develop a substance use or other mental health disorder later in life.
- Children who start to use substances early on have a big likelihood of being exposed to many different factors of vulnerability.

What are specific needs of children and youth in different age groups?

At each age, children and youth need to achieve certain goals in terms of learning skills. If this does not happen, their vulnerability to engage in risky behaviours later on in life is much higher, because their safe and health development is compromised. This is why the factors described earlier can increase the vulnerability of children and youth: they can have a negative impact on the entire development process.

- Early in life it is important to develop safe attachment to the caregivers. After this, learning basic literacy and numeracy skills starts, together with learning of impulse and self-control and goal directed behaviour.
- During middle childhood all these skills develop further. Besides developing self-regulation further, the learning of various social and emotional skills becomes increasingly important for healthy and safe development. Social skills are for example communication skills, sense of respect and responsibility, and self-expression, and emotional skills mean for example recognising emotions in self and in others, and being able to communicate them constructively. Furthermore, in middle-childhood, socialising in to a role of a student, and attachment to school, become important.
- During adolescence attitudes and intentions towards risky behaviours develop. During this period, it is important to achieve and maintain resilient emotional and mental health, supported by the personal and social skills learned earlier. Absences of early risky behaviours, such as smoking, are important for safe development during this age.

Get more facts:

- NIDA Drug Facts *Understanding Drug Abuse Addiction* provides you with more information on addiction, brain functions and risk factors as well as further links: <http://www.drugabuse.gov/publications/drugfacts/understanding-drug-abuse-addiction>
- NIDA for teens is a website especially designed for teenager. It provides you with drug facts, a blog, videos, and much more: <http://teens.drugabuse.gov/>
- UNODC International Standards on Prevention of Drug Use, helps you to understand the issue of drug use prevention more: <http://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/prevention/prevention-standards.html>