



Keeping some New Year's resolutions may require help

By Melanie Dallas, LPC

New Year is the time when many people make resolutions to get healthier – perhaps by eating better, exercising more, losing weight, or quitting smoking or other unhealthy habits. For some, the New Year may mean trying to quit drinking alcohol or using drugs. I use the word ‘try’ because quitting substance use often requires more than a resolution or simple willpower.

Researchers and treatment professionals increasingly understand that substance use disorders, including addiction, are complex. Prolonged or heavy use of drugs or alcohol not only change the way people think but can result in changes to the brain itself.

According to the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA), drug addiction is a chronic disease characterized by compulsive, or uncontrollable, drug seeking and use that can cause harmful consequences and changes in the brain.

NIDA researchers have also found that over time, a person's ability to choose not to use drugs, including alcohol, becomes compromised. “Seeking and taking the drug becomes compulsive...mostly due to the effects of long-term drug exposure on brain function.”

The American Psychiatric Association (APA) recognizes this as well, noting that changes in the brain's wiring are what cause people to have intense cravings for the drug and make it hard to stop using the drug. According to the APA, “people with addictive disorders may be aware of their problem, but be *unable to stop it even if they want to*” (emphasis added).

These statements make some important things clear about addiction. First that addiction is a chronic disease – meaning it is not a moral failing or the result of poor character, as some people used to believe. Second, addiction causes changes to the brain that increase the desire to use substances, even when people know it will cause problems.

Finally, and perhaps most important for people struggling with substance use, is that brain changes caused by this disease mean people may not be able to stop using drugs or alcohol when they want.

In other words, although some people may be able to “kick the habit” on their own, most people with addictive disease will need help in order to stop using substances and recover. Fortunately, that help is available.

According to NIDA, there are a variety of effective approaches to treating addiction, including individual and group therapy, support groups, medications, or a combination of those treatments. Treatments might also include detoxification, if necessary, and depending on the severity of the substance use disorder, take place in a residential, outpatient or intensive outpatient setting.

The specific type of treatment or combination of treatments will vary depending on the patient's individual needs and, often, on the types of drugs they use, says NIDA. In addition, many treatments might also include family therapy and other supports.

Of course, when seeking treatment for addiction – or any behavioral health problem – it is important to work with a provider that you feel is the best fit for you and your needs, strengths and preferences. What's important is getting the help you need and starting on the path to recovery.

Highland Rivers Health is one of several providers of substance use and addiction treatment services in northwest Georgia, serving children, adolescents, adults and veterans. We provide outpatient substance use counseling at all nine of our outpatient clinics, intensive outpatient services in several locations, and residential treatment for both men and women. We also operate three crisis/detoxification units.

So if your New Year's resolution is to stop drinking or using drugs, your next resolution should be to get help doing it. Don't wait, make the call today.