

Alcohol Addiction

Affecting the Brain's Reward Pathways

Nearly 14 million Americans abuse alcohol or are alcoholic. Alcohol abuse destroys families, undermines communities, and contributes to 100,000 deaths each year, including half of all traffic fatalities. In addition to its untold emotional costs, alcohol abuse takes a staggering financial toll. Every year, alcohol dependence and abuse costs Americans over \$100 billion in lost earnings, medical care, alcohol-related crime, and accident damage.

Society pays a great price for alcohol abuse, but it also helps to promote it. Movies, music, and advertising imply that drinking makes people glamorous, sophisticated, and popular. Excessive drinking is often laughed at and seen as a harmless and natural rite of passage to adulthood. In fact, alcohol dependence can lead to broken families, financial problems, physical injuries and illnesses, legal crises, and psychological devastation.

Scientists view alcoholism not as a reflection of weak character but rather as a complex, chronic, life-threatening disease with powerful psychological and genetic components. Alcohol acts on the brain's reward pathways through intricate mechanisms that are not fully understood. The disease takes many forms and defies an easy solution. Some people are able to maintain fairly normal function, superficially masking their drinking problems, while others lose complete control of their lives. Whatever their personal situation, individuals suffering from alcohol dependence are at a significant risk for a multitude of medical, legal, financial, and social problems.