

Coping strategies: addiction

Introduction

We all experience stress and emotional pain in our life, but we all cope in different ways.

Coping mechanisms and coping strategies are things we do to try and protect ourselves from stress, anxiety, trauma, or any other mental health challenge. They could include anything from scrolling our mobile phones and running marathons to excess drinking or gambling. The aim of these behaviours is always to escape the emotional discomfort we're experiencing.

Some coping strategies may help in the short-term, but go on to cause harm longer term. Some coping mechanisms don't have the same long-term cost on our health.

Ideally, any coping behaviour would lead to the problem being resolved in a way that reduces stress and harm. You can find tips and advice on beneficial coping strategies, good self-care, and wellbeing in our resources [here](#).



This resource considers some coping strategies that might cause longer term harm or distress. With these types of coping strategies it helps to be mindful of how you use them, in order to avoid longer term harm. Not everyone who enjoys an alcoholic drink after a stressful day will become an alcoholic, but it's beneficial to be aware of when a habit stops being helpful.

We'll explore how to spot the signs of harm in yourself or a colleagues and where to get support if it's needed.



What are these coping strategies?

We're all human, and it is not uncommon to cope with the stress and difficult life events with behaviours that don't necessarily benefit us in the long term.

These may include:

- Self-harm or risky behaviour
- Addiction - to drugs, alcohol, gambling
- Over eating, emotional eating or binge eating
- Alcohol consumption - including excessive drinking outside of regular social situations
- Spending and shopping - in a way that harms your financial situation or home life
- Gambling in bookies or, increasingly, online

The examples above are generalisations and people may use other coping strategies.

Generally, a behaviour can be defined as destructive if engaging in it leads to some kind of harm to you or others.



A note on coping strategies that support you

Education Support has a range of [resources](#) to help you look after yourself and prioritise your wellbeing — even during times of great stress.

It's important to remember that it is definitely possible to learn new coping strategies if you're worried that yours are causing you harm. An important starting point is awareness of your stress levels, and how you usually cope.

If you are engaging in harmful behaviours to help you cope with difficult situations, or are worried about how you are coping, professional support may help.

Sometimes a feeling of shame can prevent us from seeking support, so finding a trusted person — professional or otherwise — to talk things through can be a helpful starting point.

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Shame hates it when we reach out and tell our story. It hates having words wrapped around it - it can't survive being shared. Shame loves secrecy.

Brené Brown, The Gifts of Imperfection

Below are a few examples of alternative coping strategies that it can be helpful to explore if you are worried that your current ones aren't helping you.

There are many more and these are often personal to people. Finding out what works for you is an important part of managing your wellbeing.

- Spending time with people you care about and who care about you e.g. close colleagues, friends and family
- Doing activities you enjoy or following your passions
- Exercise and keeping active - this doesn't have to be marathon running, just moving your body in a way that's enjoyable

- Finding people you can trust to talk to about any worries you may have
- Caring for your body by feeding it enough of the nutrients it needs
- Giving yourself permission to rest properly — not all your time has to be dedicated to doing things
- Relaxation, mindfulness and meditation



If you would like to take action to change your coping strategies but don't know where to start you can **phone the Education Support Helpline for free:**

UK-wide: 08000 562 561 day or night

Text: 07909 341229 (answered within 24 hrs)

Addiction as a coping strategy

What is it?

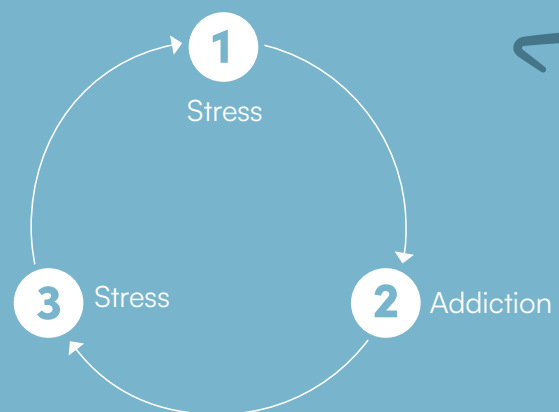
Addiction is defined as not having control over doing, taking or using something to the point where it could be harmful to you. Addiction is most commonly associated with gambling, drugs, alcohol and smoking, but it's possible to be addicted to just about anything, including work.

There are lots of reasons why addictions begin. In the case of drugs, including alcohol and nicotine, these substances change the way you feel, both physically and mentally. These feelings can be enjoyable, provide an escape from anything negative you may be experiencing, and create an urge to feel that way again. Gambling can result in a similar mental "high" after a win, followed by a strong urge to try again and recreate that feeling. This can develop into a habit that becomes very hard to stop.

Given the high stress levels that many teachers and other school staff report, it is crucial that schools provide a psychologically safe environment which enables all staff to be aware of and constructively manage stress.

Stress is a significant cause of addiction.

This phenomena is known as the **stress-addiction-stress chain**



1 A person experiencing stress turns to a drug (i.e. alcohol or nicotine) or gambling (or other addictive behaviour such as self-harm, excessive internet usage or shopping) as a means to alleviate stress.

2 They then become addicted.

3 This addiction brings about its own level of stress, the problem is compounded and inevitably reaches a crisis point.

Spotting signs of addiction in yourself

Being aware of your stress levels and the ways you manage situations in school and at home will help to keep any potential addictive behaviours at bay, but we know that this isn't always possible and people can find themselves experiencing addiction.

The symptoms and signs of addiction depend on what type of addiction is being experienced and vary from person to person.

There are however some signs that are common in most types of addiction, including drugs and gambling. These include:

- Psychological
- Behavioural or social, and
- Physical symptoms



If you feel you recognise some of the signs in the table below, it may be that you need to seek support.

Social / behavioural	Physical	Psychological
Secretive, hiding or partaking in certain behaviours that others may deem as dishonest	Extreme weight loss / gain	Mood swings
Poor performance and/or attendance at work	Lack of concern over physical appearance	Inability to focus or concentrate in the classroom
Withdrawing from responsibility and socialising	Issues with personal hygiene	Paranoia and defensiveness
Losing interest in activities, hobbies or events that were once important to you	Disrupted sleep patterns and extreme tiredness	Increased anger and agitation with colleagues, students of family/friends to make it feel more 'school related'
Trying but failing to reduce or stop using a substance		Memory problems
Break down in family relationships		Lower self-esteem
Lack of inhibitions and increased risk taking		Poor judgement
		Feelings of hopelessness
		Obsessive thoughts and fixating on the source of the addiction

Spotting signs of addiction in others

The signs of addiction that you may look for or recognise in yourself are the same that you may look for or notice in colleagues. Of course, observing some of these symptoms does not necessarily mean that you, or your colleague, has an addiction - you can only identify certain patterns of behaviour that may suggest addiction. There are some specific behaviours and signs that might be more commonly observed at work and as some school staff in particular work very closely together they may be some that are easier to spot, such as:

- Falling asleep at work, or constantly appearing to be very tired
- Suddenly making frequent mistakes
- Frequent trips to the bathroom or any private space or break room
- Extreme mood swings
- Withdrawing from team, department or staff social activities
- Difficulty concentrating or recalling details
- Inability to follow instructions
- Unusual amount of time needed to complete routine tasks
- Changes in appearance or personal hygiene

What to do next

Addiction is a treatable condition. Whatever the addiction, there are lots of ways you or colleagues can seek help. Seeing a GP for advice or contacting an organisation that specialises in helping people with addictions is a good place to start.

For yourself:

If you are concerned for yourself, then the best thing to do is to seek support and if necessary treatment for addiction. If you need treatment for drug addiction, you're entitled to NHS care, and visiting your GP is a good place to start. They can discuss your problems with you and get you into treatment, including potentially referring you to your local drug service. You can also [visit the Frank website](#) to find local drug treatment services or call the Frank drugs helpline on 0300 123 6600, where you will be talked through all your options.

If you think you may be addicted to gambling then [this NHS webpage](#) offers a short questionnaire to help you understand the extent of the issue and signposts to a range of gambling support organisations.



For colleagues:

If you are concerned for a colleague at school, then be aware that shame and stigma can often prevent people from acknowledging their potential addiction and seeking help. It is important to broach any conversation in a sensitive and considered way. A person with an addiction can have a real effect on the lives of those around them including work colleagues and friends, and family. There are some sources of support below for people who are close to those experiencing addiction. You may also want to talk to a Union representative, confidentially, about what steps to take next. You don't need to be an expert or qualified professional to be able to listen or signpost a colleague to support if they need it.

If you do decide to have a conversation with a colleague about what you've noticed here are some suggestions of how to do this in a safe way:

- Make sure you speak in a private place where you won't be interrupted and don't have the conversation in front of any other colleagues, including those in management
- Do not use accusatory or judgemental language and keep an open mind at all times
- Present your concern for their wellbeing and their job security
- Stick to the facts about the behaviors or patterns you have noticed that have led you to have a conversation about addiction
- Ask what you can do to help, if anything
- Signpost to support using information [here](#).



For school leaders:

Employers, including schools, can benefit from developing and enacting a policy on drugs, alcohol and other substances in consultation with staff or health and safety representatives. This is sometimes included as part of wider occupational health and safety policies, including stress management policies. This would include employers obligations to look after employees' wellbeing and what support is available to anyone who may be experiencing addiction.

If you are in a position within your school to suggest, lead or contribute to awareness raising activities about unhealthy coping mechanisms including addiction, and / or support the development of information and signposting for school staff so they are aware of where to seek support if they need it, then doing so would help promote an overall environment where staff feel able to seek help for addiction if and when they need it.

Coping strategies sources:

















1. careinmind.com.au
2. www.mentallyhealthyschools.org.uk

Coping strategies sources:

1. www.nhs.uk/live-well/healthy-body/addiction-what-is-it/
2. www.beatingaddictions.co.uk
3. www.mind.org.uk/information-support/guides-to-support-and-services/addiction-and-dependency/addiction-and-dependency-resources/#ForGeneralInformationAboutAddiction
4. www.priorygroup.com/addiction-treatment/signs-and-symptoms-of-addiction
5. www.unison.org.uk/get-help/knowledge/health-and-safety/alcohol-drugs-and-substance-abuse/

Seeking help - specific sources of support for addiction issues

You could use this [signposting template](#) to create a specific tool for your school to include some or all of the support options below:

-  **Beating Addictions** - a range of different information and support available for people with addictions.
-  **DrugWise** - information about drugs including alcohol and tobacco.
-  **NHS Live Well** - advice, tips and tools to help with health and wellbeing.
-  **Club Drug Clinic** - information and support for people worried about their use of recreational drugs.
-  **Cocaine Anonymous UK** - help and support for anyone who wants to stop using cocaine.
-  **DAN 24/7** - a bilingual English and Welsh helpline for anyone in Wales in need of information or help relating to drugs or alcohol. Also known as the Wales Drug & Alcohol Helpline.
-  **FRANK / 0300 123 6600** - confidential advice and information about drugs, their effects and the law.
-  **Gamblers Anonymous** - support groups for people who want to stop gambling.
-  **Gamcare** - information and support for people who want to stop gambling, including a helpline and online forum.
-  **Narcotics Anonymous** - support for anyone who wants to stop using drugs.
-  **National Problem Gambling Clinic** - treats people with gambling problems living in England and Wales aged 16 and over.
-  **NHS Better Health — Quit smoking** - NHS information and advice to help stop smoking.
-  **Sex and Love Addicts Anonymous** - support groups for people with sex and love addictions.
-  **We Are With You** - supports people with drug, alcohol or mental health problems, and their friends and family.
-  **Adfam** - information and support for friends and family of people with drug or alcohol problems.
-  **Families Anonymous** - support for friends and family of people with drug problems.

