

ADDICTIVE PATTERNS: OVERVIEW FOR PARENTS & CAREGIVERS

WHAT IS ADDICTION?

Addictions are about avoiding unwanted and uncomfortable feelings. When we feel sad or bored or nervous, we want those feelings to go away so we use things outside of ourselves as distractions. There is nothing inherently wrong with this – in some situations it can be a positive influence to distance ourselves from overwhelming feelings. But what happens is that our mind learns that this substance or activity removes the stress of uncomfortable emotions in the moment and so every time we feel that feeling, our mind will signal to us that we should do that thing or have more of that substance.

IS MY TEENAGER ADDICTED?

Most teenagers will have some form of addictive pattern – whether it's mild or severe. This could be related to their phone or technology in general, gaming, food, or substances. If a teenager feels insecure or bored, they might go on their phone and start scrolling through social media. In the moment, this distraction pushes their feelings of insecurity and boredom away, so their mind forms an impression that social media is a soothing, helpful activity. But the more we push feelings away, the more overwhelming they become because we are less and less used to feeling them. So the next time this teenager feels even the slightest bit insecure or bored, their mind will send a signal that they should get their phone and go on social media immediately. The more times this happens, the more intense their craving becomes, and the more sensitive they will be to any feelings of insecurity or boredom. This is why teenagers can act so irrationally upset when you tell them to get off their phone. They don't just WANT to be on their phone, their mind has turned their phone into a NEED.

HOW CAN I SUPPORT MY CHILD TO SHIFT OUT OF ADDICTIVE PATTERNS?

The only way we can help youth shift these patterns is by giving teens the tools to recognize what underlying feeling they are trying to avoid, and helping them find a different way of relating to that feeling. When we are talking to teens about addiction it's important to start with letting them know that we understand why they are tempted to form addictive patterns, because they are a common response in all of us. Then we want to help them see where these patterns come from, and give them tools for teaching their mind that their feelings aren't actually going to hurt them, which will mean that the craving will no longer be necessary and will fade away. If you can role model this yourself, it helps a lot – use the exercise below to start the conversation!

TIPS FOR PERFORMING AN EXERCISE TO SHIFT ADDICTIVE PATTERNS

- Pick something that you each turn to when you are overwhelmed or stressed
- Create a challenge for both of you to go without your fix for an hour/day/week
- Together, notice the feelings that arise when you are not engaging in this action (eg. Anxious, sad, bored)
- Do something that encourages you to connect to those feelings (eg. Journaling, taking a bath, doing an artistic activity)
- Notice that the feeling eventually passes all on its own when we don't avoid it
- Reward yourselves for your efforts!