



High-Functioning Drug Addicts

Did you know that some of the most tragic stories of drug addiction come from high-functioning drug addicts? "High-functioning addict" is a term used to describe a person who appears to have a very successful life but is actually living a secret life of addiction.

As many as 50% of drug addicts and alcoholics could be considered high functioning. Most people know a high-functioning drug addict or alcoholic. It is possible that some of the coworkers and managers that you look up to and respect the most for their successful careers could be dealing with a secret addiction that is in the process of destroying their lives.

Secret Addictions

How long would it take you to figure out that a coworker or supervisor is dealing with a secret addiction? Most people think they could recognize the problem pretty quickly. But because many drug addicts can be high functioning, you may not suspect a problem even if you have known them and worked with them for a long time.

High-functioning drug addicts such as successful professionals, powerful executives, doctors, lawyers, business owners, and others are masters at hiding their addictions. Their struggles with substance abuse can go unnoticed for years until the consequences finally increase to such severe levels that their lives implode.

High-functioning drug addicts do not fit the typical drug addict stereotype. They might not use drugs every day like most addicts, and they have found ways to avoid many of the serious problems that "street" addicts suffer. But the question begs to be asked: if these individuals can remain successful in spite of their addiction, how much more could they accomplish if they would seek treatment and get well?

High-Functioning Addicts in Denial

High-functioning addicts are often able to manage their jobs and their families in such a successful way that they don't even realize they have an addiction problem.

High-functioning drug addicts are usually outgoing and friendly. Many are extremely intelligent and charismatic. They are able to maintain careers, raise families, and have lots of friends. But they all have one thing in common: they are very good at explaining away every

error and every failure to deliver. These individuals are always able to provide justification for every action.

There are multiple pro-drug websites where functioning addicts post comments boasting about their ability to maintain successful careers while using and abusing alcohol and drugs. These comments all have one thing in common: the poster always says he could stop using drugs or alcohol if he chooses. The denial in these comments is blatantly obvious. Often, these addicts state that even if they do use drugs more than they should, they are entitled to do so because they work so hard (but many work just so they can afford to continue their drug use). This form of denial is usually reinforced by family members, friends, and coworkers who also fail to recognize or admit that there is a problem. But even the most successful high-functioning addicts experience ramifications of their drug use.

What is the Problem?

If high-functioning addicts are able to lead successful lives, maintain relationships, and care for their families, what is the problem? The problem is that addiction is a chronic disease of the brain, and unless something happens to break the cycle of addiction, the addict will eventually progress to fourth-stage addiction. Chronic drug use over a long period of time causes persistent changes in the brain that make it more and more difficult for the addict to control his or her substance abuse and impulses.

Even though they may appear to function normally in daily life, high-functioning addicts pose a threat to themselves and others. They have the same drug cravings as "street" addicts, they continue to use drugs in spite of the potential for adverse consequences, and they exhibit other common symptoms of addiction.

The functioning addict is unable to stop using their substance of choice for any long period of time, unable to stop craving it, unable to see how it impacts other people in their life, and unable to see how it affects their emotions. While the high-functioning addict may appear to "have it all together," they do suffer from the same problems as the "street" addict. They suffer from the same internal shame, the same emotional consequences, and they are not proud of many of their past behaviors and the lies they have told to protect their drug use and their double life.

As drug addiction continues, adverse consequences may set in gradually over many years, or they may

occur suddenly as the result of a drug-fueled accident, a drunk driving or drug possession arrest, or sudden onset of health problems.

Signs of a High-Functioning Addict

What are some signs of a high-functioning drug addict? For some, it may be changes in behavior that are very different from their sober selves. Failing to make it to important meetings or social events is one indicator. Changes in attitude and the inability to maintain focus on a project or task are other possible signs. Obsessing about the next opportunity to use drugs and the inability to control drug cravings are other indicators. Continuing to use drugs in spite of negative consequences is a sure sign of addiction.

For some high-functioning drug addicts, the problem ultimately becomes evident because of a change in physical appearance and/or the occurrence of symptoms such as paranoia, insomnia, shakiness, or other health issues. For many, the addiction is finally revealed at work through missed deadlines, frequent absences and tardiness, risky behavior, accidents, and mistakes.

If the answer to many of the following questions is “yes,” then there is a good chance the individual in question is a functioning addict or alcoholic. Has the person done something risky such as driving while drunk, stoned, or high? Does he hide his abuse from others? Does she use drugs or drink in the morning? Does he get upset when someone brings up his drug or alcohol use? Does he use drugs at work? Has she tried to stop using but been unable to do so? Does she think about and talk about getting high or “partying” often? Has he ever drunk or used drugs to the point of blacking out? Once he starts drinking or drugging, does he find it hard to stop?

Overcoming Denial

Getting a high-functioning drug addict to accept help is difficult because the person is still able to function and therefore does not realize or admit a need for help. When confronted with their

addiction the high-functioning addict will usually deny the possibility by citing all of their accomplishments.

High-functioning addicts are almost always in denial (denial is a part of the disease of addiction) and it is difficult to get them to understand the danger of continuing in their addiction. However, when a coworker, supervisor, or family member informs the addict that his substance abuse is evident to those around him, it often is enough of a shock to get the person to think about seeking help.

A functioning drug addict needs to understand how his behavior is negatively affecting others in emotional, physical, and spiritual ways. In many cases, a positive drug test at work is the catalyst that helps the addict recognize and admit the problem.

High-functioning addicts believe that they are keeping their substance abuse private, and when they learn this is not the case, and that those around them do not approve of the behavior, many will take the very important first step and get treatment.

High-functioning addicts may not want to seek help, however, because of the fear of losing their job, but many employers will work with an employee who needs help, and there are executive rehabilitation facilities that make it possible for the patient to continue working while receiving treatment. In some cases, it is even possible to receive treatment on an outpatient basis. In some cases, medication may be prescribed along with therapy to treat the addiction.

Treatment Works!

During the treatment process, if a functioning addict can be made to see the dangers of continued drug or alcohol use, many will make the changes necessary to stop the process of addiction. Treatment helps the patient to realize the things he or she does not like about using drugs. It helps the addicted person realize how substance abuse is really negatively impacting him, his family, and his work.