

Self-Soothing



Why is self-soothing important?

Our minds and bodies are programmed to return to homeostasis or balance to maintain our health. When it comes to regulating our emotional state after an upsetting event, self-soothing behaviours help us return to a calm, restful condition, back within our window of tolerance. It is important for us to soothe ourselves after a shock, trauma, or upset, as this helps maintain and protect our mental health.

Healthy self-soothing involves various activities, including grounding techniques, meditation, soothing touch, and engaging the senses. These activities can help us move away from difficult thoughts and feelings.

Click here for an article
 on ideas for self-soothing:



Experience the Calm
 meditation on this topic:



When Self-Soothing Becomes Unhealthy

Sometimes, we turn to unhealthy means of soothing ourselves. We do this as these behaviours release endorphins – the “feel good” chemicals – into our brains. We may do this to numb ourselves, escape from our thoughts and pains, or feel relief, if only for a short period of time.

Some people turn to **substances** to soothe, such as:

Alcohol	Caffeine
Cannabis	Hallucinogens (PCP, LSD)
Hypnotics, sedatives, anti-anxiety medication	Prescription/non-prescription opioids
Prescription/non-prescription stimulants	Tobacco/nicotine

Each of these substances are very different from each other, and they all strongly activate the reward and pleasure centre of the brain.



Some people may turn to potentially harmful behaviours to soothe:

Gambling	Eating
Exercising excessively	Dieting
Shopping	Shoplifting or risky behaviours
Having sex	Viewing pornography
Video gaming	Internet use

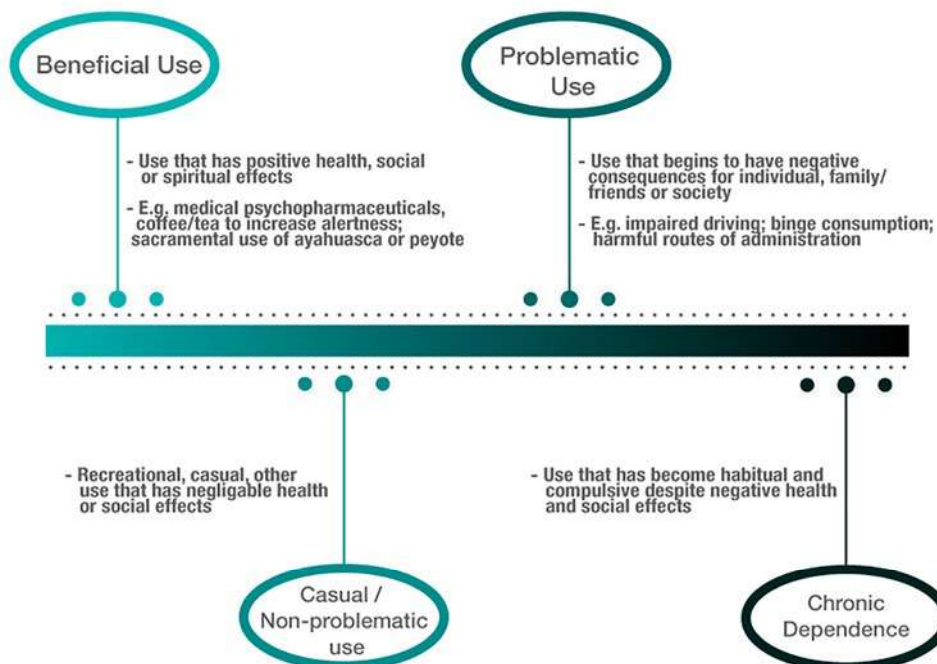
Behavioral addictions can occur with any activity that is capable of stimulating your brain's reward system. These behaviors provide temporary relief, but can negatively affect your mental or physical health. Researchers say unhealthy self-soothing includes any actions that offer short-term comfort but cause long-term harm.

When to be Concerned

Why do some people have difficulty with addictions from substances or behaviours, while others do not experience any harm? People turn to these methods of self-soothing for different reasons. Someone who does not cope well with stress might find that alcohol may help them ignore difficult feelings. Someone else might use a drug to feel relief from mental and/or physical pain. Another person might use a drug out of curiosity.

Consider this visual related to the spectrum of substance use from the Canadian Mental Health Association:

Spectrum of Substance Use



Adapted from graphic presented in A Public Health Approach to Drug Control in Canada, Health Officers Council of British Columbia (2005)

We may find ourselves at different places on this continuum at different times of our life, and in relation to different substances.

Some people may find themselves on the right side of the spectrum, which moves towards chronic dependence, because of a combination of factors.

- **Genetics:** Studies show that genetic factors are responsible for 40% to 60% of the vulnerability to any substance use disorder. If you have a first-degree relative (biological sibling or parent) with a substance abuse disorder, you are more likely to develop one.
- **How drugs interact with their brains:** Substances will stimulate different people's brains in different ways. People want to repeat an immediate rewarding experience that feels good.
- **Environment:** Access to substances, the opportunity for use, and the attitude and behaviours of those in proximity can all be risk factors. Those with adverse childhood experiences are also at a higher risk.
- **Mental health issues:** More than 50 per cent of people with substance use disorders have also had mental health problems at some point during their lifetimes, particularly mental health conditions, such as depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and bipolar disorder.
- **Coping with thoughts and feelings:** People with poor or depleted coping skills may turn to substances as a way of coping with difficult emotions or situations and may start to rely on substances to regulate their emotions.

Application to School Leaders

While educators are not usually found in the 'Top 10' careers most susceptible to addiction, it is still a role

that can bring much mental and emotional stress. This is particularly challenging when you are experiencing community trauma and the complexity of student needs, as your coping skills are continuously tested.

The shame and embarrassment that comes with addiction can keep people from seeking help, as does the fear of the impact on their employment if the addiction is exposed. This is particularly problematic in smaller communities, where people may pursue their addiction in their homes, and not seek out local support groups due to their community role and reputation.

Am I Addicted?

There is not a single cause of addiction: it is a very complex condition. A significant part of how addiction develops is through changes in your brain chemistry. Substances send massive surges of dopamine through your brain, in a way similar to having sex or spending money. Such massive dopamine levels can have damaging effects on your thoughts, feelings, and behaviour.

This can create an unhealthy drive to seek more pleasure from the substance or activity, and less from healthier activities.

Over time, the substances or activities change your brain chemistry, and you become desensitized to their effects. You then need more of the substance in order to produce the same effect.

For some substances, such as opioids, the withdrawal symptoms are so severe that they create significant motivation to continue using them.

What are the Signs of Addiction?

The signs of addiction vary from person to person and are based on the substance or activity.

In general, according to the Cleveland Clinic, these signs can include:

- **Inability to stop:** People may use a substance or engage in harmful addictive behaviour even if they want to stop. They may have tried multiple times to reduce the substance use or behaviour, but have been unsuccessful. They may also lie to their loved ones about the behaviour, or try to hide it.
- **Increased tolerance:** Over time, they may need more of the substance or activity to feel the same euphoric effects as they did before.
- **Intense focus on the substance or activity:** People with addictions can become pathologically preoccupied with the substance or activity, to the point that they may feel that the addiction has taken over their lives.
- **Lack of control:** They may feel like they have lost complete control over the substance use or activity, and often feel helpless. They may often feel guilty, depressed, and/or overwhelmed by their addiction and by how much it has impacted their lives.
- **Personal problems and health issues:** Addiction can impact all aspects of their lives, including their physical health, mental health, personal relationships, and career. They may have trouble fulfilling responsibilities at work, school, or home due to substance use or activity. Again, despite knowing the detrimental effects of their addictions, they cannot stop.
- **Withdrawal:** People with addiction may experience emotional and physical withdrawal symptoms when they stop using. Physical symptoms include shaking, sweating, or vomiting. People may also become anxious or irritable.

Visit the
Cleveland Clinic:



How are Addictions Treated?

If you are concerned that you may be struggling with an addiction, make an appointment with your physician. Your physician may recommend a combination of treatment options, depending on your behaviour and/or usage patterns and the substances you are ingesting.

- **Hospital management:** This may be required to help you withdraw from the substance you have been using, as reducing the intake quickly can be dangerous and needs to be carefully managed.
- **Medications:** There are certain medications that can help reduce urges, cravings, and ongoing withdrawal symptoms. If you have another mental health condition, such as bipolar disorder or depression, your provider may treat those with medications.
- **Rehabilitation (rehab):** Often called “residential treatment”, you may live at an inpatient rehab facility or visit one for scheduled appointments (outpatient rehab). These programs provide structured counseling, education, support and encouragement during rehab to help you withdraw, manage your addiction long-term, and live a healthier life. With that said, getting into these facilities in British Columbia can be challenging. Government funded options have a long wait list, and private treatment centres can be very costly.
- **Therapy:** Several types of therapy help people with addictions to gain new perspectives and change their behaviour.

Your provider may recommend cognitive behavioral therapy or group therapy.

- **Support groups:** Many people manage addiction with the help of a support group, such as Alcoholics Anonymous or Narcotics Anonymous. Groups like Al-Anon support family members and friends of people with substance use disorders. These groups offer people the opportunity to share experiences and find ongoing support.

Looking Ahead

We all need healthy ways to self-soothe; particularly in the role of an educational leader. Self-soothing is a valuable skill for managing emotional distress, and promoting overall well-being, by finding ways to calm and comfort ourselves. However, if you are concerned that your engagement in self-soothing is not healthy, know that you are not alone; it may be more common than you think. Do not suffer alone, reach out to your physician, your counsellor or even to the BCPVPA, and we will direct you to helpful resources.

We invite you to read the the story that follows, an insightful, vulnerable article written by a peer, a Principal in a smaller community whose experience may be relatable to many. They describe how alcohol became a self-soother in their work, the ensuing denial, the tipping point, and the path to affordable help and valuable resources that has allowed them to walk the road to sobriety, in a private, supportive way.

Sources

<https://www.camh.ca/en/health-info/mental-illness-and-addiction-index/addiction>

<https://www.addictionhelp.com/addiction/canadian-statistics/>

<https://ontario.cmha.ca/addiction-and-substance-use-and-addiction/>

<https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/diseases/6407-addiction>

For a list of local resources for mental health and addiction, members can visit My BCPVPA, click on the Member Health Tile, and select the Mental Health and Addictions folder.



BCPVPA Members can find member news, information on member services and professional learning, contacts, resources, and so much more through My BCPVPA



Visit bcpvpa.org
and select My BCPVPA
Follow the instructions in
eNews to set up your account