



ASAM American Society of Addiction Medicine

Definition of Addiction

Background

Clear language and terminology in medicine is critically important in communicating current understandings of disease, risk factors, diagnosis, prognosis, treatment options, health, and wellness to patients, the public, policy makers, media, and others. Given the stigma associated with substance use and addiction, this is especially true for addiction medicine. Terminology in this area has long presented challenges to clinicians, patients, family members, policy makers, the media, and the general public. Even the name of the American Society of Addiction Medicine has evolved from previous terms found in the titles of predecessor organizations: alcoholism, alcohol and other drug dependencies, addictionology, and, finally, addiction medicine.

To help clarify the meaning of addiction-related terms as used by ASAM, the ASAM Board in 2007 endorsed the establishment of a Descriptive and Diagnostic Terminology Action Group (DDTAG). This group conducted extensive research and deliberated at length to develop ASAM's 2011 long and short definitions of addiction* as well as definitions for terms related to treatment, recovery, and the spectrum of unhealthy substance use. The DDTAG noted that variations in assumptions about what constitutes the desired outcomes of recovery, whether facilitated by professional treatment or not, were inherent in terminology challenges.

Since 2011, the public understanding and acceptance of addiction as a chronic brain disease and the possibility of remission and recovery have increased. At the same time, there is growing acknowledgment of the roles of prevention and harm reduction in the spectrum of addiction and recovery. In response, ASAM's Board in 2018 recognized the need for an updated definition of addiction that would be more accessible to many of ASAM's stakeholder groups, including patients, the media, and policymakers. Accordingly, the Board appointed a Task Force to Update Terms Related to Addiction and the Treatment of Addiction. With the input of internal and external stakeholders, the Task Force revised the definition of addiction for use in ASAM's policy statements.

The Task Force also recommended that definitions for "medication-assisted recovery (MAR)" and "medication-assisted treatment (MAT)," which had been identified by the DDTAG as transitional terms, be retired from use in ASAM documents. With the evolution of addiction treatment and its increasing integration with general medical care, the Task Force recommended ASAM adopt general medical terminology to describe addiction treatment. Therefore, ASAM recommends using the term "medication" to refer to any FDA-approved medication used to treat addiction. However, ASAM recognizes the continued widespread use of the acronym "MAT" in laws, regulations, academic literature, the media, and the vernacular, and ASAM suggests "MAT" be read and understood as "medications for addiction treatment."

*archived in 2019

Definition:

Addiction is a treatable, chronic medical disease involving complex interactions among brain circuits, genetics, the environment, and an individual's life experiences. People with addiction use substances or engage in behaviors that become compulsive and often continue despite harmful consequences.

Prevention efforts and treatment approaches for addiction are generally as successful as those for other chronic diseases.

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