



Key Questions to Consider when Seeking Substance Abuse Treatment

The Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse (CCSA) has developed this document to address the key questions that should be considered when seeking and selecting services and supports for substance use problems. These questions and their answers will help individuals, their friends and family choose effective, evidence-based services that best meet their needs.¹

Individuals seeking service should always feel free to ask questions of treatment providers. They should gather as much information as possible to help them understand what to expect from a service and to evaluate whether it will meet their needs.

What are evidence-based treatments and why are they so important?

Treatment programs that use evidence-based treatment practices should produce better treatment outcomes. Evidence-based treatments have undergone research and scientific study and have shown they can produce positive treatment outcomes. Examples of evidence-based treatment include **behavioural social skills training**, **motivational interviewing**, **cognitive behavioural therapy**, **behaviour-based couples counselling** and the **community reinforcement approach**.

What kinds of treatment techniques are effective?

Effective programs teach participants skills and techniques that train them to anticipate and cope with a wide range of situations that are “high risk” for substance use. They also teach participants to minimize the damaging effects of potential slips or relapses. In fact, if handled well, a “slip” can be turned into a positive experience that leaves the individual stronger and better prepared to handle future challenges. The techniques you might experience during treatment include role-playing, active rehearsal, repetitive practice, relapse prevention and coping skills training.

Some treatment techniques lack evidence-based support and so are not recommended. Examples include education-based and confrontational approaches, and supplement-based cleanses.

What treatment options might be available?

Detoxification

Detoxification (detox) or **withdrawal management** is a medical procedure that assists individuals who have been actively using or who have become dependent on alcohol or other drugs to safely and comfortably withdraw from their use. The procedure is supervised by medical and social service personnel such as physicians, nurses, social workers and psychologists. A number of prescription

¹ CCSA's *Valuing Lived Experience* brief provides information on getting involved in system-level change to improve the services that are available.



medications might be used to assist in the process. Withdrawal management can take place in a hospital, a specialized detox centre or in a home-based setting, depending on the services available. Assessments and referrals to follow-up treatment programs should be part of the detox process.

Residential Treatment

Residential treatment provides a supportive and protective environment that in itself can be therapeutic. The 28-day program is a commonly known form of residential care made popular in movies and television. Other types of residential care include **therapeutic communities** and detoxes. Residential treatment can be short term, for example a week, or long-term, with some lasting a year or more. As with all forms of treatment, it is important to know the evidence that supports the type of treatment being used in the program.

Group Counselling

Group counselling or therapy is usually the treatment of choice in residential programs and is also used by outpatient teams in the community. These sessions can be either closed groups with a defined beginning and end date or they can be open ended where new members can join at any time. Groups can be led by social workers, psychologists or other health professionals trained in group therapy. Again, it is important to know if there is evidence to support the type of group therapy being provided. **Behavioural social skills training**, where participants learn the skills they need to reach their treatment goals, is known to be an effective treatment model for groups.

Individual Counselling

Individual counselling or therapy is usually done on an outpatient basis, but can be a component of residentially based care. Typically, sessions last an hour and are scheduled every week to two weeks. Therapists or counsellors should use an evidence-based treatment approach, so be sure to ask what approach they use and what evidence supports it. The health professionals providing this type of specialized care include psychologists, social workers and other professional counsellors. Community-based individual counselling is usually a key component of an after-care plan following a stay in a detox program or a more intensive residential program.

Mutual Aid

Mutual aid groups, such as Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) and Narcotics Anonymous (NA), have a long history of helping individuals with addictions. These groups might be part of a residential program or suggested as part of an after-care program. They provide safe environments where individuals struggling with addictions are able to support each other. They provide a ready-made safe social network. Regularly attending mutual aid groups can help achieve good treatment outcomes.

Self-Directed Change

There are also a range of tools and resources to help individuals make changes on their own. Many of these tools and resources are available online. This option is particularly valuable for individuals with low to moderate substance use problems who are very motivated to change.

What should I expect when I start treatment?

There are very practical questions to answer before starting any treatment program. Such questions include where the program is located, what transportation options are available, how long the program lasts, what costs and payment options are involved, what special clothing or other supplies are required, what a typical day includes and what rules are in place.



Does the service provider conduct an initial assessment to develop an individualized treatment plan for each individual?

Not everyone has the same severity of alcohol or other drug problem. Standardized and validated² assessment tools and techniques allow service providers to determine the seriousness of a client's substance use problem. They can also identify needs associated with mental health or other medical conditions.

Does the service provider match the treatment plan to the severity of the individual's problem?

People with problems of low severity generally need low-intensity services that last for a relatively short time. Those with more serious problems require higher intensity and lengthier treatment. An individual with less severe substance use problems might have his or her needs met through short-term services offered in the community. An individual with more severe problems might need detoxification followed by a structured residential setting and a plan for long-term support.

Does the service provider offer treatment to meet the needs of individuals with regards to gender, age, culture, ethnicity and sexual orientation?

Individuals should ideally receive treatment that responds to unique personal characteristics such as gender, age, culture, ethnicity and sexual orientation. Research demonstrates that women, for example, use alcohol and other drugs for different reasons than men; and that youth have very different patterns of use than adults. Intervention and support services that are specific to individual characteristics are often better able to meet individual needs and produce better results.

Does the service provider offer a full range of services to address all relevant needs of participants?

Comprehensive programs recognize that substance use problems affect and are affected by an individual's physical and mental health, and his or her family, friends, legal issues, employment, housing and other determinants of health. Providers of comprehensive programs coordinate or offer services that directly address needs in these diverse areas. Research indicates that involving family members to support the process of behaviour change is an effective approach, particularly for youth.

Does ongoing assessment take place during the program? Does the treatment plan change according to progress and changing needs?

An individual's treatment needs evolve and change over the course of a program. The service provider should monitor, re-assess and change the individual's specific services and overall treatment plan to keep up with the individual's changing needs.

² "Standardized and validated" means that these tools are tested to ensure that they are accurate, and formatted and delivered in a consistent way that maintains accuracy.



Does the service provider offer maintenance, after-care and post-treatment support?

The process of changing substance use does not stop on the final day of treatment. A key ingredient in success is often post-treatment maintenance, after-care and support. Research has found that individuals who attend maintenance and after-care sessions are more likely to change and sustain change in behaviour over the long term.

How does the program develop and maintain the therapeutic relationship with its clients?

The therapeutic relationship is the level of trust and connection between the counsellor and the client and is the most important influence on a successful treatment outcome—even more important than the type of treatment used. How is the therapeutic relationship built, maintained and monitored throughout treatment? How actively is the client involved in his or her own care? **Motivational interviewing** is an evidence-based treatment that prioritizes the therapeutic relationship between counsellor and client as they work together to achieve the client's treatment goals.

Are significant others involved in the clients care?

Research tells us that the involvement of significant others, such as family members or close friends, in a client's treatment improves client outcomes. **Behaviour-based couples counselling** and the **community reinforcement approach** are examples of evidence-based practices that actively involve concerned significant others in a client's treatment.

Does the service provider insist on abstinence from all drugs or is reduction or moderation of use accepted?

Some service providers insist on complete abstinence (non-use) from all drugs before, during and after treatment, and will dismiss participants caught using. Other service providers use a **harm reduction approach**. This approach recognizes that some individuals might be unable or unwilling to discontinue use of alcohol or other drugs completely. The approach also recognizes the fact that many individuals are capable of reducing, moderating or controlling their use of alcohol and other drugs, and to maintain that moderation over the long term.

Does the treatment program measure its effectiveness?

A responsible addiction treatment system will include a way to measure whether the program has done what it set out to do. This is referred to as **outcome monitoring**. Outcome monitoring is more than just measuring how satisfied clients are with the service provider. It must include measurement of changes in clients' lives that have occurred as a result of coming to treatment, for example, drinking less alcohol or getting along better with family members. Outcome monitoring can be as simple as measuring a client's progress while he or she is still in treatment, or contacting a client after he or she has completed treatment to assess the ways that his or her life has changed.

General questions to ask of an addiction treatment program about its outcome monitoring include:

- How effective is the program at helping clients reach their goals?
- Does the program help people improve their quality of life?
- What type of information is collected?
- How does the program collect and use the information it collects?



- Are the overall results shared with clients or the public on a regular basis as part of quality improvement and transparency?

What are the service provider's professional qualifications?

Ensuring that the people offering treatment services are qualified to do so is important. Services should be willing to answer questions such as whether the program is accredited, and by what professional body, and what the educational and training qualifications of the staff are. CCSA and its partners have developed a set of competences to guide professional practice in addictions treatment. They can be accessed at [Competencies for Canada's Substance Abuse Workforce](#).

Where can I find more information?

Information and links for provincial substance use services are available at www.ccsa.ca.

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