



Assessing Risk Factors

A **risk factor**, by definition is *anything that increases the probability of developing a negative condition*. The negative condition to be discussed in this case is a substance abuse problem or addiction. Remember, there are always exceptions to the rule so if someone has a lot of addiction risk factors that does not automatically mean that the person is destined to one day be addicted to drugs or alcohol. The presence of multiple risk factors simply means that the chance is greater for a problem than for someone with less risk factors.

Scientifically Based Risk Factors for Substance Use and Addiction:

By studying traits of people who became addicted to alcohol or other drugs over the past several decades, scientists and researchers have determined some common risk factors that increase the likelihood of an individual having a substance use issue or addiction later in their life at some point. Complete the following exercise then engage in a discussion on addiction risk factors as a group. Consider what stood out to each individual as significant. Discuss the *optimism bias* and the importance of being self-aware about risk factors

Directions: Review each risk factor below and follow the instructions for each risk factor by coloring in the correct amount of sections on the bottle on the following page. **Fill in sections on the bottom of the bottle first and work upward thus “filling” the bottle as risk factors apply to you**

Keep in mind that this is not a diagnostic test, but just an awareness-building tool designed to open up discussion about risk factors for substance abuse/addiction

- * **Genetics:** Biological family history is a major substance abuse risk factor. *(Follow instructions carefully only filling in a maximum of 5 sections of the bottle for this genetics part)*
 - If your biological mother had a problem with addiction in her life fill in one section
 - If your biological father had a problem with substances fill in one section
 - If you have at least one biological grandparent with an addiction issue in the past or present, fill in just one section
 - If you have one or more siblings with addiction issues fill in a section (just one)
 - If you have one biological Aunt or Uncle with an addiction issue fill in one section
- * **Family Attachment:** Lack of closeness with one’s immediate family is a risk factor. Some examples include difficulty communicating, lack of trust, difficulty getting along, not doing things together as a family, lack of rules or regulation (If this risk factor is present, fill in one or two sections)
 - If you feel somewhat detached from your immediate family fill in one section or if you feel that your family is very detached and unconnected then fill in two sections
- * **Self Esteem:** If you feel that you have a moderate problem with self-esteem or self-image fill in one section. For a more serious issue with self-esteem fill in two sections of the bottle
- * **Age of First Use of Substances:** If you first started using substances to get high at an early age fill in one section (14 or younger)
- * **Stress Level:** If you feel that you have a stressful life for someone your age then fill in one section
- * **Existence of another Mental Condition:** If you have another issue such as ADHD, a Learning Disability, Anxiety, Depression, Anger Issues, Bipolar Disorder, etc. fill in one section but if you feel your issue is very serious or if you have multiple issues fill in 2 sections of the bottle



- * **Natural Tolerance Level:** People who naturally take more than usual to get high are more prone to addiction. If you have a naturally high tolerance level for substances fill in a section
- * **Trauma, Abuse or Neglect:** If you have had a history of abuse, neglect or trauma in your life fill in two sections
- * **Easy Access to Substances:** If it is very easy for you to get substances to get high fill in a section
- * **Peers:** If most of your friends get high or use/abuse substances fill in a section
- * **Early Anti-Social Behavior:** If you have a history of getting into trouble or getting involved with delinquency or aggression/fighting at a young age fill in one section but for a more serious issue fill in two sections
- * **Loneliness or Alienation:** If you feel lonely more often than you think that you should or if you often feel like you are not a part of what is going on around you fill in a section
- * **Risk-Taking/Impulsivity:** If you are prone to taking risks or acting without thinking (impulsivity) fill in two sections
- * **Lack of Coping Skills:** If you feel that you need better skills for coping with life's problems or if you are already using substances to escape stress fill in two sections

“It Won’t Happen to Me” – *The Optimism Bias*

The optimism bias is the tendency for an individual to believe that he or she is at less risk of experiencing a negative event than others. The optimism bias is very common among all types of people regardless of gender, race, age and nationality. The optimism bias makes sense because it is focused on our inner sense of hope that things will turn out well in our lives. However, when it comes to issues such as addiction, it can be harmful for an individual who is engaging in risky behavior to be overly convinced that “it won’t happen to me” simply because he or she feels strongly about it. Logically speaking, no one plans to become addicted to drugs so simply saying “it will never happen to me” is not enough. In fact many people who later realize that they have a substance use issue often regret that they did not see it coming before it was too late.

Therefore, if you are a young person and you are already displaying some risk behaviors, it is important to be realistic with yourself and consider the potential future consequences of your choices today rather than blindly relying on the belief that, “it won’t happen to me” only to possibly regret it later.

“To thine own self be true” – William Shakespeare

