

Post-Acute Withdrawal Syndrome (PAWS)

You are likely familiar with the painful withdrawal symptoms that people who have been using opioids, or stimulants like cocaine and meth experience when they suddenly stop using the substance. Stopping benzodiazepine use can result in a great deal of anxiety and even seizures as can heavy alcohol use. Marijuana withdrawal symptoms can include restlessness, irritability, and sleep issues. The extreme symptoms that some people experience immediately after they stop using substances are called “acute withdrawal”. It’s the body’s reaction to not having the substance that it was used to having.

Acute withdrawal, unfortunately, is not the whole story. A person’s body makes initial adjustments to the absence of substance, and the major symptoms ease up. However, the changes that have occurred in their brains need time to heal to achieve a healthier state of being. **During the period while this is occurring, there can be a variety of problems known as Post-Acute Withdrawal Syndrome (PAWS).**

People who chronically misuse substances can suffer damage to their bodies and nervous systems from the substance use, accidents, and malnutrition. They may also suffer from chronic diseases such as diabetes and hepatitis, and a host of other problems (e.g., relationship, employment, housing) in early recovery too. When people stop using substances, it doesn’t necessarily solve all their problems, but it does make the presence of problems a lot clearer to the individual!

Recovery can cause a great deal of stress. Many people who misuse substances never learn to manage stress without substances or do so only after many attempts at recovery. Their ability to deal with it depends on not only their willingness to take care of themselves and maintain a healthy lifestyle, but also having access to recovery supports including healthcare, housing, transportation, employment/schooling, etc. Repairing the damage to their nervous systems can take many months or even a few years with a healthy program of recovery.

Symptoms

For most people, PAWS symptoms reach a peak from 3-6 months after abstaining from substance misuse. Any use of substances, even in small quantities or for a short time, can sabotage improvements gained over that time, as it will slow the brain from healing. There are a variety of symptoms although not everyone will experience all of them. Here are some of the more common ones:

1. **Inability to solve problems:** Inability to solve problems leads to frustration and lowered self-esteem. Your loved one may feel embarrassed, incompetent, and “not okay.” This may contribute to difficulties performing at work or school and tension in relationships. There can be a sense of, “I can’t do this! These all add to our stress, and the stress further exaggerates the other problems. Six things contribute to this: trouble thinking clearly, emotional overreaction, memory problems, sleep disturbances, physical coordination problems and difficulty managing stress.
2. **Inability to think clearly:** In early recovery, it can seem like the brain works properly only part of the time. Sometimes a person’s head just feels fuzzy because of the changes that occurred in their brains while they were using. The changes take time to improve. Also typical for

people in early recovery is that they are trying to process a lot more information than they had done before. While using, they mainly thought about getting more, using, and turning off their brains. In early recovery, they are thinking about many things necessary to truly live their lives, which can feel overwhelming.

3. **Inability to concentrate:** It can be difficult to focus on tasks – even simple ones – and people in early recovery can find that their thinking feels scattered and thoughts are bouncing in all different directions.
4. **Rigid, repetitive thinking:** Thoughts can go around and around in early recovery, and people might have trouble putting their thoughts into useful order. It can be hard to channel thoughts and concentrate on one thing at a time.
5. **Memory problems:** Someone in early recovery may hear something, understand it, and 20 minutes later...it's gone! This complicates life in many ways. It upsets supervisors, annoys significant others, and makes people wonder if they're losing their minds. With memory problems, it's hard to learn new skills and absorb new information. People learn by building on what they have already learned, and memory difficulties can make it hard (if not impossible) to do that. Again, these difficulties add to stress, especially if people don't understand what's happening to them. They may get so frustrated that they might think, "This stinks – I might as well be high."
6. **Emotional overreaction or numbness:** People with emotional problems in early recovery can be irritable or overreact. When this overreaction puts more stress on their nervous systems than they can handle, they can react by "shutting down" their emotions. They might become emotionally numb and unable to feel anything. They may swing from one mood to another. These mood swings can be alarming, seeming to come without any reason, and may even be misdiagnosed as bipolar disorder.
7. **Sleep disturbances:** Disturbed sleep is quite common in early recovery. It may last for quite a while. It's also not unusual to have vivid dreams of using substances only to wake up panicking that they have relapsed. Sleep deprivation stresses the body, prevents the mind from working well, and generally exaggerates any other difficulties.
8. **Stress:** Difficulty managing stress is the hardest part of post-acute withdrawal, and of early recovery in general. There is a direct relationship between elevated stress and the severity of PAWS. Each amplifies the other. Even minor stress can cause an exaggerated reaction in early recovery. It's not unusual to cope with stress with other not-so-healthy habits like smoking or binge eat.

Note: Recovery from the damage caused by substance misuse requires total abstinence from substances, unless prescribed by a medical professional who understands both addictive diseases and pharmacology. This specifically includes herbal remedies (like CBD) which, in many cases, are just as powerful and dangerous as prescription drugs.

It is important that our loved one in early recovery gain some understanding about post-acute withdrawal, be able to recognize its symptoms when they appear, and know what to do to help stabilize episodes of PAWS.