THE ADDICTED BRAIN
WHY WE ABUSE DRUGS, ALCOHOL, AND NICOTINE

MICHAEL KUHAR
The Addicted Brain
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Why We Abuse
Drugs, Alcohol, and Nicotine

Michael Kuhar
This book is dedicated to those afflicted with brain disease, to their caregivers and supporters, and to the researchers who hope for a better future.
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# Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td></td>
<td>xi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chapter 1</strong></td>
<td>What’s in This Book, and Why Should I Read It?</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chapter 2</strong></td>
<td>Hardwired: What Animals Tell Us About the Human Desire for Drugs</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chapter 3</strong></td>
<td>Feeling Good: The Brain’s Own Reward System</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chapter 4</strong></td>
<td>The ABCs of Drug Action in the Brain</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chapter 5</strong></td>
<td>The Dark Side Develops!</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chapter 6</strong></td>
<td>Why Are Drugs So Powerful?</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chapter 7</strong></td>
<td>The Brain Is Changed—For a Long Time!</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chapter 8</strong></td>
<td>Could I Become an Addict?</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chapter 9</strong></td>
<td>Stress, Social Status, and Drugs</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chapter 10</strong></td>
<td>Gambling, Sex, and Food</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chapter 11</strong></td>
<td>What Else Do Drugs Do to Me?</td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chapter 12</strong></td>
<td>Women and Adolescents</td>
<td>159</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chapter 13</strong></td>
<td>Treatment: How Do I Get Better?</td>
<td>171</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chapter 14</strong></td>
<td>What Does the Future Hold?</td>
<td>189</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Glossary</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>203</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Index</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>211</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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About the Author

Michael Kuhar, Ph.D., is currently a professor at the Yerkes National Primate Research Center, Candler professor in the Emory University School of Medicine, and a Georgia Research Alliance Eminent Scholar. His general interests have been the structure and function of the brain, mental illness, and the drugs that affect the brain. Addiction has been his major focus for many years, and he is one of the most productive and highly cited scientists worldwide. He has trained a large cadre of students, fellows, and visitors, received a number of prestigious awards for his work, and remains involved in many aspects of addiction research and education. In June 2011, he received the Nathan B. Eddy lifetime achievement award from the College on Problems of Drug Dependence.
Robert’s friends convinced him to try crack cocaine at a senior party when he was still 17 years old. It took his head places he could only imagine, and he wanted more, more, more. Three years later, he could no longer hold a job. His teeth were loose and two had fallen out. He stole. He sold his body. He did anything for more! He had been to rehab twice and was back on the street again, and all he wanted was more.

This is a book about seduction, amazing pleasure, and a world inside your head that is both fantasy and real. This fantasy world is not easy to give up, and, like all fantasies, it can be trouble if you can’t get back into the real world where you need to live, work, pay bills, and take care of loved ones. Drugs, the brain, and addiction create this dreamland of fantasy, but it can quickly turn into a hell, and it often does.

Research has taught us how drugs and other pleasures affect the brain. It turns out that drugs, gambling, Internet use, and chocolate all affect the brain in similar ways. The importance of this discovery extends well beyond knowing about drug abuse and pleasure; it impacts on ethics and morality, the nature of the brain as a survival organ, the evolution of the brain, and the good, the bad, and the ugly of human nature. Anything that reveals the vagaries and limitations of the human brain is useful and a service to us all. Understanding the brain and human behavior is a basic requirement for setting realistic goals for personal and societal improvement.

Aside from the amazing discoveries, a special glory of this book is the inclusion of wonderful techniques that help us examine the brains of drug users. For example, the development of brain imaging enables us to study how drugs affect the brain without any physical invasion of the head. This is something not even imagined decades
ago. There are many other striking techniques such as drug self-administration and biochemical analyses of tissues. When I say this is a glory, I realize that reveals something about me and my preferences, but you are invited to share in this. I’m lucky that I have spent more than four decades doing this science, watching its progress, and seeing its impact on public health. Within these pages is a fascinating story of science in the service of men.

Different drugs, some legal and others illegal, release powerful demons in our brains. Surprisingly, the demons—the chemicals and nerve cells in our brains—are already there, working in an important but much smaller way that is essential for our functioning. Drugs create the demons by disrupting the chemicals and nerve cells so that they get out of control and wreak havoc in many people. Decades of scientific research have revealed how this happens.

The demons behave as expected. Once unleashed and in power, they don’t go away easily. Even after we stop taking drugs, they influence our actions for a long time, for many months or even years. They want you to continue to feed them by taking more and more drugs. Part of the power of the demons is that they reside in powerful brain systems. These brain systems have to be powerful because they have a big job, such as keeping us fit and surviving. The long life and the power of the demons make them formidable enemies, but we are not alone or helpless. Treatment and rehab centers help us regain control of our lives. The same demons seem to apply to other addictions—gambling, carbohydrates, sex, and the Internet. Studying one addiction—drugs—helps us understand other addictions.

Knowing the demons is helpful. Because we can understand them and what they do, we can develop medications and other treatments to thwart them and help drug users. In fact, the search for medications, although not yet complete, has been quite successful. We gain ground every day. Also, changing our behaviors and habits in constructive ways thwarts the demons.
Some of us are lucky and we either have no interest in drugs or can walk away from them at any time. Everybody’s brains are different, at least to some degree, and have different vulnerabilities to drug use. Surprisingly, women and men respond differently to drugs, and so do adolescents and adults. Teens are a special concern because of their youth and increased sensitivity to drugs. Many studies have revealed why this is so and why some of us are more likely to get into trouble with drugs than others. Stress, involved in so many health problems, also feeds the demons of drug abuse. Our genetics also play a role, but not an overwhelming one; we can still fight back.

Drug abuse and addiction are costly, not the least because of the misery they bring. Because of this cost, society has invested in science to combat drug use. It is paying off. We have found the demons, and we can fight. But if you are new to the war itself, because of the addiction of a loved one, a patient, or yourself, then prepare to arm yourself to fight.
What’s in This Book, and Why Should I Read It?

“I’m only 14 years old and I’m in a drug counselor’s office. I’ve been stealing, missing school, and failing most of my subjects. It seemed to start when I got involved with drugs. We got dope from older brothers and sisters, from parents’ medicine cabinets, and on the streets. We never thought of it as ‘doing drugs.’ We were just having fun and hanging out, and we thought we could stop anytime. But we fooled ourselves. It caught up to us big time. Now I need to find out about what happened and what I can do to turn my life around. I need to know everything!”

Getting hooked on drugs is a sequence of attraction, seduction, compulsion, and pain. Drugs are dangerous and widespread, and dealing with them requires knowledge and help. This book is about alcohol, nicotine, and illegal drugs—how they work, what they do to the brain, and what can be done to stop using them. The book is especially about what happens inside the brain and why the brain just happens to be set up for drugs. Yes, the brain is set up for drugs; the brain is a co-conspirator, albeit an unwitting one!

When is someone a drug abuser or an addict? If someone uses drugs casually and infrequently without significant problems and can take them or leave them, that person might best be called a user, which is still a dangerous situation. If taking drugs causes significant distress and problems in the person’s life, then abuser might be the...
The Addicted Brain

best descriptor. If drugs are in control of a person’s life, or if they can’t stop, or if they do drugs in spite of personal distress and negative consequences, then they might be drug dependent or addicted. Even people who are not users, abusers, or addicts are very likely to gain from reading this book.

The text box that follows provides definitions of specific levels of drug use. Addiction is the most serious form of the disorder and it can develop when drugs are taken repeatedly over a long period of time. Taking larger quantities of drugs more frequently is likely to result in addiction more quickly. However, there is no mathematical equation describing this process. It is not exact. Moreover, the process varies depending on the individual and his or her circumstances.

### Definitions

*DSM IV TR* is the latest edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* that is published through the American Psychiatric Association. It is the official manual for defining and diagnosing the spectrum of disorders that involve drug use. It is used by professionals to more precisely define the degree of drug abuse. Please see this manual for the official definitions.

- **Drug use** can refer to any use of a drug, but more often, it refers to an occasional or recreational use of drugs. In this case, acute or immediate effects and toxicities can be significant. If the drug used is an illegal one, then there is the legal transgression to be concerned with, too. Also, there is the danger of continued use of drugs to where they become a more serious problem.

- **Drug abuse** is a more serious problem where there is a greater degree of drug use and a distressing or negative impact on the drug user’s life. It can get further out of control.
• **Addiction** or dependence is yet more serious and includes more of a loss of control over drug seeking and drug taking in spite of distress and/or negative consequences. Note that both loss of control over behavior and distress or negative consequences are emphasized. But, there are additional characteristics of drug addiction that are well known. Considerable time may be spent getting and using the drug. More drug is taken than intended. Efforts to stop taking the drug often fail. Tolerance, which is the need to take larger quantities of the drug to get the same effect, develops. Also, perhaps there are withdrawal symptoms when the effect of the drug wears off. Thus, an individual might have a problem with drugs even though there are no distressing feelings or negative consequences that are evident. The words addiction or dependence are used to refer to more severe cases of drug seeking and taking.

The use of drugs is not simply a passing fad or the latest, cool thing. Drugs of one type or another have been with us for a long time, literally thousands of years. Opium has been used in China for centuries, and cocaine use in early Indian cultures goes back centuries. There is even a reference in the Bible about getting drunk on wine. There are things about both the nature of drugs and the human brain that make drug use enduring over the ages, and this reveals a special vulnerability in humans. For example, in 2006-2007 in the United States, there were more than 22 million people, 12 years of age and older, who were classified with drug abuse or drug dependence on illicit drugs or alcohol.

What is it about addiction that grips certain individuals so firmly that they lose at least some control over their drug taking and sometimes over their lives? This book attempts to answer this question by examining research discoveries from the previous couple of decades. Extraordinary progress has been made in drug abuse research.
What Is a Drug?

When talking about drugs that can be abused, there are about seven different groups of substances. These are nicotine; sedatives such as alcohol, barbiturates, benzodiazepines, and inhalants such as fumes from glue; opiates such as heroin and morphine; psychostimulants such as cocaine, amphetamine, and methamphetamine; marijuana; hallucinogens; and caffeine. Prescription drugs that are abused comprise many of the previous classes and are shown in the following list:

- Club drugs, which includes:
  - GHB (Also known as Goop)
  - Ketamine (Also known as K)
  - MDMA (Also known as E)
  - Rohypnol (Also known as Roofies)
- Cocaine, which is also known as nose candy, C, and blow
- Crack (another form of cocaine, and also known as Freebase, Rooster, and Tornado)
- Hallucinogens, which includes:
  - LSD
  - Mescaline (cactus)
  - Psilocybin (Mexican mushrooms)
  - Heroin (Also known as Big H, China White, and Smack)
- Inhalants, which include:
  - Air blast
  - Huffing
  - Moon gas
  - Marijuana
  - Methamphetamine (Also known as Crank, Ice, and Stove top)
- Prescription drugs, which include:
  - Methaqualone (Also known as Ludes)
  - Oxycontin (Also known as Hillbilly heroin)
  - Ritalin (Also known as Vitamin R)
  - Steroids (Also known as Juice, Pumpers, and Weight trainers)
This list is composed of illicit drugs and doesn’t include alcohol or nicotine. A much more detailed list of abused drugs can be found on the ONDCP (Office of National Control Drug Policy) website at http://www.whitehousedrugpolicy.gov/drugfact/crack/index.html.

Why are these groups of chemicals addicting? It is striking how they can have such different effects and uses; for example, opiates relieve pain, and sedatives produce sleep, yet both have the danger of addiction. What is it about these chemicals, and not others, that give them such power? A reasonable answer is that it is an accident that all these particular compounds are addicting. There are, perhaps, millions of chemical compounds on this earth, and it is, perhaps, just unfortunate that some of these chemicals can hook into the brain in such a way that they become addicting. Of course, some of these drugs are used more than others (see Figure 1-1).

It is useful and can eliminate confusion to make a distinction between the words drugs and medications. The word drug is used in this book to refer to a substance with the potential to cause harm, abuse, and addiction. Of course, there are other drugs that are therapeutic, cure diseases, and are employed by doctors to treat specific maladies. These latter substances are referred to herein as medications. Drugs of abuse can also have legitimate uses in medicine and be medications. Cocaine is a powerful vasoconstrictor in that it closes off blood vessels and can be used to reduce bleeding in surgery. Amphetamine is a stimulant and can be used to treat Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). Opiates are indispensable in the treatment of pain, but they can cause addiction nonetheless. Depending on how and why they are used, many of the substances can be both drugs and medications. Prescription drugs are another example of this; they are medications that can be abused and therefore are also drugs.
Figure 1-1  The number of individuals, ages 12 or older, who have used the indicated drug within the past 12 months (in millions). Psychotherapeutics refers to prescription drugs that were abused; these drugs include Oxycontin, Vicodin, amphetamines, Ritalin, and sedatives. These numbers of users, which range from 200,000 to over 15 million, are small compared to the number of individuals using the legal drugs, like alcohol and nicotine. More than 50 million people smoke, and an even larger number take alcohol regularly. The relatively larger use of alcohol and nicotine are probably due to the legality of these drugs and their greater availability. Legal drugs are used probably ten times more than illicit ones. (Source: SAMSHA, 2008, National Survey on Drug Use and Health, September 2009).

Why People Take Drugs

People take drugs for many reasons. They can produce a so-called rush of pleasurable sensations, which is a dramatic and memorable experience. Sometimes drugs are taken because of peer pressure or stress. Related to the latter, drugs are sometimes used to self-medicate unpleasant feelings such as pain, anxiety, or depression. When addicted, users may take drugs to avoid the negative symptoms of withdrawal. Withdrawal is a series of distressing feelings and physiologic reactions that occur when drug taking is stopped.
The Drug Experience

The drug experience usually fits a pattern among users. The first use of a drug, a critical occurrence, is often influenced by various factors that include curiosity, friends who may apply pressure to try a drug, availability of a drug, or even a permissive home where parents and siblings are users. Reactions to a drug can vary among individuals. Some people enjoy them and some don't. Perhaps someone begins taking a medication for a medical problem such as pain and then continues using.

The next phase is persistent drug use, in which there is more individual initiative and drive to find and take drugs. This can result in problems such as chronic intoxication, missing work or school, and perhaps stealing. There might be other missed obligations, arrests, or irresponsible behaviors such as unprotected sex. If drug taking continues, a state of addiction can result. Also, more and more of a drug may be taken to get the same effect, and efforts to stop drug use may fail. Other drug-related problems can occur in life, and good health can be threatened. Although some people can stop using drugs, others drift in and out of drug use for decades or for a lifetime. Someone might someday find that his or her life is gone, wasted by a brain disorder that he or she failed to understand and cope with.

Some drug abusers are lucky; they can quit by themselves or find a family member, friend, or counselor who can help them stop. They might get into treatment on their own or they might be forced into treatment by a judge. However it happens, treatment is effective, even for people forced into it. Sadly, because of ignorance, poverty, denial, or fear of the stigma of being labeled an addict, some never find treatment.

Drug Use Is Costly in Many Ways

Many individuals and families know from first-hand experience how hurtful addiction can be, not only to the drug users, but also to
individuals around them. The consequences of drug use include damaging families, relationships, or communities, and perhaps increasing the risks for serious illness or crime. Often, the drug user has vowed to stop and has tried to stop many times only to fall back and relapse into further drug use or dependence. The resulting feelings of helplessness, impotence, and failure can engulf and doom someone’s entire world.

The personal and societal costs of drugs can be seen around us and in the media. Robert Downey Jr., a well known actor, producer, and singer, had a serious problem with drugs. He described to a judge how he couldn’t stop using them even though he knew he was in trouble. He also said that while starring on the television series Ally McBeal, he was at a low point and didn’t care if his acting career was over. But after five years of drug abuse, arrests, stints in rehab, and many relapses, he settled down to work on his problem. Ray Charles, the legendary performer, was addicted to heroin, but after his third drug bust, he went into rehab and gave up the drug. Fortunately, there are individuals who generously come forward, tell us their stories, and warn us about drugs. But not all drug users accept treatment or stop taking drugs, and that group generates great concern. There is even greater concern when our peers or the media glamorize drug use, which is quite dangerous.

Drug abuse is expensive. When we include additional health care costs, productivity losses, costs of crime, and so on, the dollar amount is great. In 2002, for example, overall costs exceeded 180 billion dollars, and loss of productivity accounted for a large portion of that (see Figure 1-2). Costs increased more than 5 percent annually since 1992, with the most rapid increase in costs related to the criminal justice system. These dollar figures are comparable to those for heart disease, cancer, and mental illness. They reflect a major drain on society’s resources. Of course, dollar amounts do not begin to reflect the misery that drug use can create for the individual, his or her friends, and family.
While the problems are great, they are not hopeless. Perhaps determination is wanting. Dr. Bertha Madras, a Harvard researcher in drug addiction and a former White House official, says, “When viewed from a national perspective, the drug abuse problem in this country is staggering. Yet I am certain that we can develop effective solutions and strategies if we overcome our biggest challenge—finding resolve.”

Figure 1-2  Distribution of illicit drug costs in 2002 by major components. The largest fraction of the cost of drug abuse is due to loss of productivity. “Other” costs primarily reflect the costs of the criminal justice system (incarceration, court costs, and so on) costs to victims of related crimes, and costs for social welfare. From source cited in note 5.

**Other Addictions**

Although this is a book about drugs and how people become hooked on drugs, it is also about all of our appetites; therefore, it can help us understand other potential addictions such as eating and gambling. For example, if someone overeats, craves carbohydrates every day, and has withdrawal symptoms when he stops cold turkey, then he may have a problem with carbohydrates. If such a person seeks help, then this book can help with understanding the problem and the needs for treatment. More is said later about food, gambling, and sexual drives.
Other Medications

Another point is that some therapeutically useful medicines (not addicting drugs), such as antidepressants, need to be taken over long periods of time and should not be stopped abruptly because of the danger of recurring disease. Studies of abused drugs, which also involve taking drugs over a long period of time, can inform us not only about how the useful medications produce their beneficial actions in the brain, but also about the problems in abruptly stopping their use.

Brain Structure and Functions

Before embarking on a study of the addicted brain, it is necessary to be aware of the brain and its organization. Different parts of the brain have different functions. Seventy-five percent of the human brain is made up of the wrinkled outer covering referred to as the cerebral cortex, which has different functional areas. Strokes or lesions of the motor cortex result in paralysis, the extent of which is dependent on the extent of the motor area involved. Patients with strokes in the association cortex have deficits of perception and attention. When the temporal lobe is damaged, the ability to recognize or name objects is impaired. Lesions or strokes of the frontal lobe result in personality changes, planning deficits, and inabilities to carry out complex behaviors. Strokes or tumors in other parts of the brain have many other effects as well (see Figure 1-3).

The brain is also the organ of awareness. When general anesthetics are administered, the electrical activity of the brain is reduced, and we lose awareness or go to sleep. If we stimulate the visual cortex, we might have visual images pop into our awareness. If the olfactory cortex is stimulated, then we might perceive odors. If we stimulate other parts of the brain, other events or sensations enter our awareness. Emotional behavior is also based in the brain. A group of brain regions collectively known as the limbic system controls emotional behavior and is partly responsible for feeling good. The following chapters link certain brain regions with feeling good and with drugs.
The Tool Box

Science, like everything else in our lives, has become technology-driven, and there are marvelous new approaches and instruments that allow us to examine the tiniest parts of our chromosomes or peer into the depths of our brains without surgical invasion of the skull. These tools are powerful and interesting in and of themselves.

The science of genetics has advanced, and it is now possible, with a small sample of blood, to examine our genes. Because genes are the basis of heredity, and some aspects of drug addiction are heritable, studies of genes can be informative. The target of these studies is DNA, which is made up of four different chemicals called bases, and it is the order of these chemicals in our DNA that specifies our genes. These chemicals—abbreviated as the letters A, T, G, and C—are lined up in two parallel strands that comprise the structure of DNA. Again, it is the sequence of these bases, in groups of three, that
constitutes our genetic code, and certain parts of our genetic code can contribute to the likelihood of our becoming a drug user.

For looking inside our brains, noninvasive brain imaging techniques can be astonishing. Magnetic resonance imaging (or MRI) describes the structure of our brains, such that changes in the size of parts of our brains can be measured. Functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) tells us about the functional activity of various brain regions. Positron emission tomography (PET) scanning is versatile. It can be used to reveal the activity of different brain regions or even the levels of certain brain chemicals and proteins. Overall, genetic and imaging studies are but two of the new tools that have become available over the past 25 to 35 years. These tools are out in front in the attack on drugs.

Questions to Be Answered

This book addresses many questions about drugs and the brain, including:

- Why is it said that addiction is a brain disorder rather than perhaps a moral failing?
- What happens in the brain of someone who uses drugs repeatedly?
- Can better medications for addicted individuals be expected in the future?
- Why is drug abuse chronic and relapsing, which is part of the essence of this disorder?
- Why are drugs so powerful that they can gain control of our behaviors, but we can’t give up responsibility for our actions?
- Will I become drug dependent?
- Are there differences among, men, women, adolescents, and older adults in how they respond to and experience drugs?
- Can one recover from drug addiction and be cured?
- The stigma of being a drug abuser is a problem in that it often prevents searching for treatment or dealing with the problem openly.
Throughout this book, we tend to refer to addiction as a disorder, but it is also often called a disease. The definition of addiction that is used in this book focuses on continued drug use in spite of distress and negative consequences. However, the official description is given in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders produced by the American Psychiatric Association, and it includes more elements. The DSM IV TR is the current edition used by medical professionals for official diagnoses. The DSM is an evolving document and DSM V is due in the near future. Currently, the diagnosis of drug dependence requires the presence of three or more of several symptoms, and it is possible to have a diagnosis of substance dependence without the presence of distress or negative consequences. The official list of symptoms and diagnostic criteria for Substance Dependence and Substance Abuse can be found in an online version of the DSM IV TR. One possible site is http://www.psychiatryonline.com/content.aspx?aID=629, which was accessed on June 28, 2011. Only a qualified professional can make a diagnosis.

Ibid.

An illicit drug is one that is not legal to produce, not legal to use or possess, or a medically useful therapeutic drug that is used non-medically.

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Index

A
abused drugs. See drugs, of abuse abusers, defined, 1
acetylcholine
  breaking down, 46-47
dopamine and, 80-81
  nicotine’s effect on, 104, 141-142
ACTH hormone, 116
action potential, 39-40
addiction
  defined, 127, 134
  drug addiction. See drug addiction
eating disorders, 130-132
  as excuse, 133
  gambling, 127-130
  helpfulness in studying all
drug addiction, 9
  nonregular rewards and, 20-21
  as scare tactic, 133
  sexual addiction, 130
addictive properties of drugs,
harmful effects versus, 137-138
addicts, defined, 2
adenosine, 152
Adler, Martin, 174
adolescents
  drug addiction in, 164-166
  vulnerability to drug use in,
  107-109
adrenal glands, 116-117
age differences in drug addiction
  adolescents, 164-166
  elderly adults, 167
airline pilots, marijuana testing
  on, 154
Alavi, Abass, 95
alcohol
  adolescent usage of, 164
  benefits of, 140
  elderly adult usage of, 167
  gender differences in effects, 160
  harmful effects of, 138-141
  medications for treating addiction
to, 180
  public good and, 202
  stress and, 120
  withdrawal symptoms, 62
alert mechanisms, dopamine and, 81
Ali, Syed, 147
amphetamine
  harmful effects of, 148
  legitimate use of, 5
  methamphetamine compared, 146
amygdala, 116
anabolic steroids, harmful effects
  versus addictive properties, 138
anandamide, 143, 191
angel dust, 151-152
animals
  advantages in research usage, 15-16
  drug use in nature, 19-20
  nonregular rewards and addiction,
  20-21
  self-administration of drugs, 16-19
    CART peptide example, 22-24
    in phases of drug use, 22
    relapse and cravings, 25-26
  self-stimulation of brain, 30-32
antibodies, 192-194
antigen, 192
apomorphine, 56, 155
assessment of treatment plans, 175
association cortex, 10
Ativan, 148
attitude toward drug abuse, changing, 200
autoradiography, 96
availability of drugs, vulnerability to drug use and, 107
aversive properties of drugs, 37
awareness in brain, 10
axon, 39-40

B
bases (in DNA), 11
Beck, Aaron, 178
Becker, Jill, 163
behavioral treatments, 177-179
benzodiazepines, harmful effects of, 148-149
binge eating as addiction, 130-132
gene expression and, 76-77
blockers, 180
body, response to stress, 115-117
brain
cocaine's effect on, 49-51
discovery of, 55
morphine's effect on, 51-52
development in adolescents, 164-166
drug addiction's effect on, 59-60
gene expression, 63-69
glucose utilization, 70-71
postmortem studies, 69-70
questions about, 12
sensitization and, 63
tolerance and, 62-63
withdrawal and, 60-62
future of research on, 191
imaging studies, 85-90
necessity of, 41
neurons, structure of, 39-41
neurotransmitters
binding to receptors, 43-45
dopamine research, 56-57
drugs of abuse compared,
removing receptors, 46-47
synthesis of, 41-42
variety of, 42-43
plasticity of, 54, 72
pleasure and reward system, 29
deep brain stimulation (DBS), 33-34
drug use and, 35-37
food and water deprivation, 34
self-stimulation, 30-33
returning to normal after drug addiction, 93-94
speed of entry of drugs, 52-54
structure of, 10-11
tools for studying, 11-12
vaccines and, 193-194
brainstem, 116
breaking down neurotransmitters, 46
Brownell, Gordon, 95
bulimia, dopamine and, 75
Bullitt-Jonas, Margaret, 130
Burham, Charles, 95

C
Cadet, Jean Lud, 147
caffeine as drug class, 4
harmful effects of, 152-153
withdrawal symptoms, 62
“Call Off the Global Drug War” (Carter), 199
cannabidiol, 143
cannabis, harmful effects of, 143-144
carbohydrates, comparison with cocaine, 131
cardiovascular disease, drug addiction compared, 173-174
Carr, Ken, 77
Carroll, Ivy, 196
Carroll, Marilyn, 77
CART peptide, 22, 24
Carter, Jimmy, 199
cell membrane, 39
cerebral cortex, 10, 150
changes in environment, detecting, 53
Charles, Ray, 8
chemical neurotransmission. See also neurotransmitters

cocaine’s effect on, 49-51
defined, 40-41
discovery of, 55
gene expression changes, 65-66
morphine’s effect on, 51-52
childhood stress, drug use and, 119-121
Childress, Anna Rose, 79
chromosomes, 63, 68
club drugs
  harmful effects of, 150-151
  list of, 4
cocaine
  alternate names for, 4
  blocking of dopamine transporter, 154, 201
  comparison with carbohydrates, 131
dopamine, effect on, 49-51
  environmental enrichment and, 125
gender differences in effects, 160-163
  glutamate, effect on, 80
  harmful effects of, 145-146
    addictive properties versus, 138
  legitimate use of, 5
  long-lasting effects of, 88-90, 94
  lowering attractiveness of, CART peptide example, 22-24
  RTI-336 medication, 195-196
  social rank and, 121-123
  stress and, 120-121
  vaccines against usage of, 192-194
codons, 64
Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, 178
colleges, treatment programs in, 179
contingency management, 178
cortisol, 116-117
cost
  of drug abuse, 7-9
  of treatment, 172

crack cocaine, 4, 145
crank. See methamphetamine

cravings, animal research on, 25-26
CRH hormone, 117
cues, defined, 22

d
D2 dopamine receptors, 88-89, 122
Darwin, Charles, 19-20
DAT (dopamine transporter), 57
cocaine blocking, 154, 201
DBS (deep brain stimulation), 33-34
de Wit, Harriet, 56, 155
decriminalization of drugs, 198-200
depression. See drug addiction; drug dependence
detoxification, 176
Dewey, Bill, 63
Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM IV TR), 2, 13, 130
diencephalic DA system, 75
dissociative drugs, 151
DNA (deoxyribonucleic acid), 11, 63-64, 67-68
Dole, Vincent, 182
dopamine, 191
  action of, 40
  adolescent brain and, 109, 166
  cocaine’s effect on, 49-51, 146
d2 dopamine receptors, 88-89
eating and, 74-77
  estrogen and, 163
  glutamate, acetylcholine and, 80-81
  in neurotransmitter research, 56-57
  in pleasure centers, 32
  reasons for existence, 81
  reuptake of, 47
  sexual behavior and, 77-79
  survival functions and, 79-80
  synthesis of, 41

dopamine system
  binge eating and, 131-132
  drug addiction and, 155-156
  gambling addiction and, 129
  methamphetamine and, 148
  social rank and, 121-123
dopamine transporter (DAT), 57
cocaine blocking, 154, 201
dopaminergic neurons, 49
dose-response studies, 37
“Double Helix” (Watson), 96
Downey, Robert Jr., 8
drinking. See alcohol
Dronabinol, 143
drug abuse. See also drug addiction;
drug use
  brain and. See brain
  changing attitude toward, 200
costs of, 7-9
defined, 2
  impaired judgment from, 109
list of abused drugs, 4-5
prevention of, 153
drug addiction. See also drug abuse;
drug use
  in adolescents, 164-166
defined, 3
dopamine system and, 155-156
effect on brain, 59-60
gene expression, 63-69
  glucose utilization, 70-71
postmortem studies, 69-70
in elderly adults, 167
gambling addiction compared, 127-130
long-lasting effects of, 85
  benefits of researching, 92-93
  brain imaging studies of, 85-90
  protein synthesis/degradation rates, 91-92
  returning brain to normal after, 93-94
as metabolic disease, 182-183
moral versus physical effects, 27
powerfulness of, 73-74
eating and dopamine connection, 74-77
  glutamate, acetylcholine, and dopamine connection, 80-81
sexual behavior and dopamine connection, 77-79
  survival functions and dopamine connection, 79-80
research. See research
  sensitization and, 63
stigma of, 173-174, 196-197
tolerance and, 62-63
withdrawal and, 60-62
women, differences from men, 159-161
  hormonal influences, 161-163
  treatment plans, 163-164
drug dependence, defined, 3
drug treatment programs. See treatment
drug use. See also drug abuse; drug addiction
  by animals in nature, 19-20
defined, 2
  enriched environments and, 124-125
history of, 3
  legal versus illegal, statistics on, 6
  phases of
    animal research in, 22
    explained, 7
  self-administration of drugs by animals, 16-19
    CART peptide example, 22-24
    in phases of drug use, 22
    relapse and cravings, 25-26
self-stimulation of brain and, 35-37
stress and, 118-119
  early life stress, 119-121
  social defeat, 124
  social rank, 121-123
vulnerability to, 99-100
  adolescence and, 107-109
availability of drugs and, 107
controlling risk factors, 110
factors in, 100
gene expression and, 101-106
  impaired judgment, 109
  personality traits and, 107
  psychological problems and, 106-107
  rider and elephant metaphor, 110-112
of abuse. See also names of specific drugs (for example cocaine, morphine, etc.)
neurotransmitters compared, 48-49
related neurotransmitters, 43
speed of entry into brain, 52-54
Index

215

classes of, 4-5
delivery methods, 53
dose-response studies, 37
harmful effects
  addictive properties versus, 137-138
  of alcohol, 138-141
  of benzodiazepines, 148-149
  of caffeine, 152-153
  of club drugs, 150-151
  of cocaine, 145-146
  of marijuana, 143-144
  of methamphetamine, 146-148
  of nicotine, 141-143
  of opiates, 149-150
  of PCP, 151-152
legalization versus
decriminalization, 198-200
legitimate uses for, 5
medications versus, 5
reasons for taking, 6
DSM IV TR (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders), 2, 13, 130

E
early life stress, drug use and, 119-121
eating, dopamine and, 74-77
eating disorders
  as addiction, 130-132
  gene expression and, 76-77
Ecstasy, harmful effects of, 150-151
Edwards, Griffith, 202
Edwards, Roy, 95
elderly adults, drug addiction in, 167
electrical stimulation
  reinforcement, 29
  deep brain stimulation (DBS), 33-34
  drug use and, 35-37
  food and water deprivation and, 34
  self-stimulation, 30-33
elephant and rider metaphor, 110-112
emotional behavior, limbic system and, 10
emotional problems, vulnerability to
drug use and, 106-107
emotional reactions to stress, 116
endogenous cannabinoids, 143
endorphins, morphine’s effect on, 51-52
enkephalins
  morphine’s effect on, 51-52
  as neurotransmitters, 191
enriched environments, drug use and, 124-125
enzymes, defined, 41
epigenetics, 67-68, 191
epinephrine, 116
estrogen, effect on cocaine addiction, 161-163
excitatory signals, 42
excuse, addiction as, 133
exercise, as treatment, 178

F
family therapy, 178
finding treatment, resources for information, 184-186
Fitch, F., 192
Fleckenstein, Annette, 147
fMRI (functional magnetic resonance imaging), 12
food addiction, 130, 132
food deprivation, electrical stimulation reinforcement and, 34
food intake, dopamine and, 74-77
Fowler, Joanna, 95, 131
Francis, Darlene, 119
Freud, Sigmund, 111, 145
frontal cortex, 116, 164
frontal lobe, 10, 90, 165
functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI), 12
functions of brain regions, 10-11
future
  of addiction research, 191
  of treatment programs, 190
  of vaccines against drug abuse, 192-194
G

G-protein coupled receptors, 44
GABA
  alcohol’s effects on, 140
  as neurotransmitter, 191
GABA-A receptors, 149
gambling addiction, 127-130
  nonregular awards and, 20-21
Gardner, Elliot, 37
gender differences in drug addiction, 159-161
  hormonal influences, 161-163
  treatment plans, 163-164
gene expression, 191
  binge eating and, 76-77
  changes in, 63-69
  vulnerability to drug use and, 101, 103-106
genetic changes
  enriched environments and, 125
  tracking, 101
genetics, 11
genome-wide association studies (GWAS), 103-104
GHB, harmful effects of, 151
glucose utilization, 70-71
 glutamate
  dopamine and, 80-81
  as neurotransmitter, 191
Goeders, Nick, 146
Goldstein, Avram, 199
Gorelick, David, 77
Grant, K., 122
group therapy, 178
Guide for the Care and Use of Laboratory Animals, 28
GWAS (genome-wide association studies), 103-104

H

Haidt, Jonathan, 110
half life, 91
hallucinations, as withdrawal symptom, 62
hallucinogens, as drug class, 4
harmful effects of drugs
  addictive properties versus, 137-138
  of alcohol, 138-141
  of benzodiazepines, 148-149
  of caffeine, 152-153
  of club drugs, 150-151
  of cocaine, 145-146
  of marijuana, 143-144
  of methamphetamine, 146-148
  of nicotine, 141-143
  of opiates, 149-150
  of PCP, 151-152
hashish, 143
Hatsukami, Dorothy, 142
Heath, Robert, 32
heroin
  alternate names for, 4
  harmful effects of, 149
    addictive properties versus, 138
Higgins, Steve, 178
histones, 67-68
history
  of chemical neurotransmission discovery, 55
  of dopamine and drug addiction research, 155-156
  of dopamine in neurotransmitter research, 56-57
  of drug use, 3
Hoebel, Bartley, 132
hormones
  influence in drug addiction, 161-163
  released during stress, 116
Howell, Leonard, 201
humans
  drug abuse research on, 28
  limitations of research on, 69
  self-stimulation of brain, 32-33
hypothalamus, 77, 116-117

I

ice. See methamphetamine
illicit drugs
  legal drug use versus, statistics on, 6
  legalization versus decriminalization, 198-200
imaging tools, 12
impaired judgment from drug abuse, 109
in vitro labeling autoradiography of receptors, 90
individual therapy, 178
infectious disease testing in
treatment plans, 176
inhalants
  adolescent usage of, 164
  list of, 4
inhibitory signals, 42
injection of drugs, 53
intermediates, 42
involuntary treatment, 176
ion channel receptors, 44-45

J–K
Johanson, Chris-Ellyn, 25
judgment, impairment from drug
abuse, 109
Kalivas, Peter, 80
Ketamine, harmful effects of, 151
King, Brett, 156
Klonopin, 148
Koob, George, 18, 60
Korsakoff’s syndrome, 140
Kosten, TA, 120
Kreek, Mary Jeanne, 118
Kuhar, Mike, 57, 96
Kuhl, David, 95

L
lateral hypothalamus, 32
legal drug use, statistics on illegal
drug use versus, 6
legalization of drugs, 198-200
Life Skills Training (LST), 183
ligand-gated ion channel
receptor, 45
limbic system, 10
liver disease, 140
Loewi, Otto, 55
London, Edythe, 110
long-lasting effects of drug
addiction, 85
  benefits of researching, 92-93
  brain imaging studies of, 85-90
  protein synthesis/degradation rates, 91-92
  returning brain to normal after, 93-94
Love Sick: One Woman’s Journey
Through Sexual Addiction
(Silverman), 130
LST (Life Skills Training), 183
Lukas, Scott, 150
Lundahl, Leslie, 25
lungs, damage from smoking, 142

M
Madras, Bertha, 9
magnetic resonance imaging (MRI), 12, 87
marijuana
  adolescent usage of, 164
  as drug class, 4
  harmful effects of, 143-144
Marinol, 143
MDMA, harmful effects of, 150-151
Meaneey, Michael, 119
medial forebrain bundle, 32
medial prefrontal cortex (mPFC), 75
medical marijuana, 144
medications
  drugs versus, 5
  risk to benefit ratio, 201
  RTI-336, 195-196
  in treatment plans, 175, 179-183
  usefulness of drug abuse studies
  for, 10
men, differences from women in
drug addiction, 159-164
mental health disorders
  managing in treatment plans, 175
  vulnerability to drug use and,
  106-107
mesocortical DA system, 75
mesolimbic dopamine system
  diagram of, 75
  survival functions of, 79-80
metabolic disease, drug addiction as,
  182-183
methadone, 181-183, 193, 202
methamphetamine
  alternate names for, 4
  effect on society, 59
  harmful effects of, 146-148
  withdrawal symptoms, 62
Methland (Reding), 59, 147
Index

Meyer, Jerry, 147
Milner, Peter, 30
*Molecules of Emotion*, 96
moral effects of drug addiction,
physical effects versus, 27
Morgan, D., 122
morphine
  antibodies against, 192
  effect on receptors in brain, 51-52
  harmful effects of, 149
motor cortex, 10
MRI (magnetic resonance imaging),
12, 87
mRNA (messenger ribonucleic acid), 64
Murphy, Ann Z., 161
muscarinic receptors, 143
mutations in genes, tracking, 101
myelin sheath, 40

N
NAcc (nucleus accumbens), 75, 77,
129, 141
Nader, Michael, 94, 122
naloxone, 180, 193
National Institute on Drug Abuse
(NIDA), 184
nature, drug use by animals in, 19-20
need for treatment, realizing, 177
nerve cells, structure of, 39-41
nerve terminals, 39-40
Nestler, Eric, 65
neurons, structure of, 39-41
neuroplasticity. See plasticity of brain
neurotransmission
  alcohol and, 140
  benzodiazepines and, 149
  caffeine and, 152
  club drugs and, 150
  cocaine and, 146
  future of research on, 191
  marijuana and, 143
  methamphetamine and, 148
  nicotine and, 142
  opiates and, 150
  PCP and, 152
neurotransmitters
  action of, 40
  binding to receptors, 43-45
  defined, 41
  dopamine research, 56-57
  drugs of abuse and, 43, 48-49
  in pleasure centers, 32
  removing from receptors, 46-47
  synthesis of, 41-42
  variety of, 42-43
nicotine
  as drug class, 4
  effect on acetylcholine, 81
  gender differences in effects, 160
  genetic susceptibility to addiction,
  104-105
  harmful effects of, 141-143
  medications for treating addiction
to, 180
nicotine patch, 181, 202
nicotinic receptors, 104-105,
141-143
NIDA (National Institute on Drug Abuse), 184
nigrostriatal DA system, 75
nonregular rewards, addiction and,
20-21
norepinephrine, 148
nucleus accumbens (NAcc), 75, 77,
129, 141
Nyswander, Marie, 182

O
O’Brien, Charles, 79
Office of National Control Drug Policy (ONDCP) website, 5
Olds, James, 30
olfactory cortex, 10
opiates
  as drug class, 4
  effect on receptors in brain, 51
  harmful effects of, 149-150
  legitimate use of, 5
  medications for treating addiction
to, 180
oral ingestion of drugs, 53
overeating, 130-132
oxycontin, harmful effects of, 149
pathological gambling. See gambling addiction
PCP, harmful effects of, 151-152
peptidases, 47
peptides, 47
peripheral neuropathies, 140
personality traits, vulnerability to drug use and, 107
PET (Positron Emission Tomography) scanning, 12, 85-86, 95
phases of drug use
  animal research in, 22
  explained, 7
Phelps, Michael E., 95
phosphorylation, 67
physical effects of drug addiction, 27
physical reactions to stress, 115-117
Pickens, Roy, 56, 155
pilots, marijuana testing on, 154
pituitary gland, 116-117
plasticity of brain, 54, 72
pleasure, dopamine and, 81
pleasure centers in brain, 29
  deep brain stimulation (DBS), 33-34
  drug use and, 35-37
  food and water deprivation, 34
  self-stimulation, 30-33
Plotsky, Paul, 119
Porrino, Linda, 70
Positron Emission Tomography (PET) scanning, 12, 85-86, 95
post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), 118
postmortem studies on drug-addicted brains, 69-70
powerfulness of drug addiction, 73-74
  eating and dopamine connection, 74-77
  glutamate, acetylcholine, and dopamine connection, 80-81
  sexual behavior and dopamine connection, 77-79
  survival functions and dopamine connection, 79-80
prefrontal cortex, 116, 139
“Prelude to passion: limbic activation by ‘unseen’ drug and sexual cues” (Childress et al.), 79
prescription drugs
  drugs versus medications, 5
  examples of abused drugs, 4
prevention of drug abuse, 183, 190
principles of treatment, 174-176
proteins
  antibodies and, 192
  brain functions explained, 63-69
  half life of, 91
  synthesis/degradation rates, 91-92
psychological problems,
  vulnerability to drug use and, 106-107
psychostimulants, as drug class, 4
PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder), 118
public good, alcohol and, 202
realizing need for treatment, 177
receptor autoradiography, 96
receptors, 40
  D2 dopamine receptors, 88-89, 122
  morphine’s effect on, 51-52
  neurotransmitters binding to, 43-45
  nicotinic cholinergic receptors, 104-105
  removing neurotransmitters from, 46-47
recovery. See treatment
Reding, Nick, 59, 147
regions of the brain, 10-11
reinforcement, 29
relapse, animal research on, 25-26
Renshaw, Perry, 150
research
  advantages of animal usage in, 15-16
  dopamine system and drug addiction, 155-156
  electrical stimulation reinforcement, 29
  deep brain stimulation (DBS), 33-34
drug use and, 35-37
food and water deprivation and, 34
self-stimulation, 30-33
future of addiction research, 191
gender differences in drug addiction, hormonal influences, 161-163
on human drug abusers, 28
postmortem studies on drug-addicted brains, 69-70
self-administration of drugs by animals, 16-19
CART peptide example, 22-24
in phases of drug use, 22
relapse and cravings, 25-26
resources for information on treatment plans, 184-186
reticular formation, 30
reuptake of neurotransmitters, 46-47
reward system in brain, 29
deep brain stimulation (DBS), 33-34
drug use and, 35-37
food and water deprivation, 34
self-stimulation, 30-33
rewards
adolescent brain and, 165-166
dopamine and, 81
nonregular rewards, addiction and, 20-21
rider and elephant metaphor, 110-112
risk factors, controlling, 110
risk to benefit ratio, 201
Ritz, Mary, 57, 146
Roberts, Dave, 56, 155
rocket fuel, 151-152
Rohypnol, harmful effects of, 151
Rothenberg, R., 192
RTI-336 medication, 195-196

S
salience, dopamine and, 81
SAMHSA (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration), 184
scare tactic, addiction as, 133
schizophrenia, 151

Schuster, C.R., 16, 192
sedatives
as drug class, 4
harmful effects of, 148-149
self-administration of drugs by animals, 16-19
CART peptide example, 22-24
in phases of drug use, 22
relapse and cravings, 25-26
self-stimulation of brain by animals, 30-32
drug use and, 35-37
by humans, 32-33
sensitization, 63
septum, 30
serotonin, 148, 191
settings for treatment, 179
sex differences. See gender differences in drug addiction
sexual addiction, 130
sexual behavior, dopamine and, 77-79
SFP (Strengthening Families Program), 183
side effects. See harmful effects of drugs
signal transduction, 66
Silverman, Sue Williams, 130
single nucleotide polymorphisms (SNPs), 104
smoking cigarettes, harmful effects of, 141-143. See also nicotine; tobacco, harmful effects of smoking of drugs, 53
snorting of drugs, 53
SNPs (single nucleotide polymorphisms), 104
social defeat, drug use and, 124
social rank, drug use and, 121-123
society, methamphetamine’s effect on, 59
speed of entry of drugs into brain, 52-54
statistics
cost of drug abuse, 8-9
legal versus illegal drug use, 6
Stein, Larry, 56, 155
steroids, 4
stigma of drug addiction, 173-174, 196-197
stimulants, caffeine, 152-153
stimulation of brain. See electrical stimulation reinforcement
storage vesicles. See vesicles
Strengthening Families Program (SFP), 183
stress
  alleviating, 117
  body’s response to, 115-117
  defined, 115
  drug use and, 118-119
    early life stress, 119-121
    social defeat, 124
    social rank, 121-123
stressors
  defined, 115
  examples of, 116
Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), 184
substitute medications
  list of, 180
  purpose of, 180-183
  RTI-336, 195-196
  successful substitutes, 202
successful treatment, defining, 172-173
survival functions, dopamine and, 79-80
symptoms of withdrawal, 62
synapses, 39-40
synaptic space, 39-40
synthesis
  of neurotransmitters, 41-42
  protein synthesis/degradation rates, 91-92
T
temporal lobe, 10
Ter-Pogossian, Michel, 95
testosterone, effect on cocaine addiction, 161-163
therapy sessions, types of, 177-178
thiamin deficiency, 140
thresholds, 35
time requirements of treatment plans, 175-176
tobacco, harmful effects of, 141-143
  addictive properties versus, 138
  long-lasting effects, 94
tolerance, 62-63
tomography, 95
tracking genetic mutations, 101
transcription factors, 64-66
transporters, 40, 47
treatment, 171
  behavioral treatments, 177-179
  cost of, 172
  future of, 190
  for gambling addiction, 129
  gender differences in, 163-164
  length of, 92-93
  medications for, 179-183
  prevention as, 183
  principles of, 174-176
  realizing need for, 177
  resources for information, 184-186
  RTI-336 medication, 195-196
  settings for, 179
  stigma associated with drug addiction, 173-174, 196-197
  successful treatment, defining, 172-173
  twelve-step programs, 93
  vaccines, 192-194
  tuberoinfundibular DA system, 75
twelve-step programs, 93
tyrosine, 42

U–V
Uhl, George, 103
uncertain rewards, addiction and, 20-21
universities, treatment programs in, 179
users, defined, 1
vaccines, 192-194
Valium, 148
variable number tandem repeat (VNTR), 76
Ventral Tegmental Area (VTA), 75, 79, 109
vesicles, 40, 42
visual cortex, 10
vitamin B deficiency, 140
VNTR (variable number tandem repeat), 76
Volkow, Nora, 131
voluntary treatment, 176
VTA (Ventral Tegmental Area), 75, 79, 109
vulnerability to drug use, 99-100
adolescence and, 107-109
availability of drugs and, 107
controlling risk factors, 110
factors in, 100
gene expression and, 101-106
impaired judgment, 109
personality traits and, 107
psychological problems and, 106-107
rider and elephant metaphor, 110-112

W–Z
Wagner, Henry, 95
Wainer, B., 192
Wang, G., 131
water deprivation, electrical
  stimulation reinforcement and, 34
Watson, James, 96
websites for treatment information, 185-186
Weeks, James, 16
Wernicke's encephalopathy, 139
Wise, Roy, 56, 146, 155
withdrawal, 60-62
  from alcohol addiction, 140
  from benzodiazepines, 149
  from caffeine, 152
  from cocaine, 145
defined, 6
  from heroin, 149
  from marijuana, 144
  from methamphetamine, 147
  from nicotine, 141
  as step in treatment, 176
  substitute medications and, 181
Wolfe, Al, 95
women, drug addiction in, 159-161
  hormonal influences, 161-163
  treatment differences, 163-164
Xanax, 148
Yamamura, Hank, 96
Yanagita, Tomoji, 16
Yokel, Bob, 56, 155
Young, W. Scott, 96
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