


# EmpowerHer

Recognizing  
and addressing  
women's addictions



NETWORK  
OF SERVICES  
TO SUPPORT  
WOMEN IN FLORENCE



In the field of the study and care of addictions, we often focus on the experiences and needs of men, neglecting the **unique experiences of women**. It is important to first recognize that women are as susceptible to addictions as men, often in different ways.

Women's addictions are distinguished by the **complexity of experiences**, generally characterized by traumas and social pressures that can amplify their vulnerability. Unfortunately, these experiences have long been ignored by rehabilitation services, which tend to be tailored to male needs.

This short guide aims to shed light on the **realities of female addictions**, providing **clear and accessible information** to those who are directly or indirectly confronted with this issue.

The guide is part of the **We-Hope**, project, funded by the Tuscany Region and implemented by **ACISJF Firenze OdV**, **Associazione Nosotras**, **Associazione Progetto Arcobaleno APS**, **Gli Anelli Mancanti**, **ItaliaHello** and **Le Curandaie APS**. We-Hope is a network of services dedicated to offering support and opportunities for **socio-economic autonomy and work inclusion to Italian and foreign women** living in marginalization in the metropolitan area of Florence.

## WHAT IS AN ADDICTION?

An addiction is a **psychological and/or physical condition** that arises from the uncontrolled interaction between an organism and a specific substance, leading to the development of **behaviors that we cannot control**. The primary behavior is the compulsive need to use a substance or perform actions to experience positive sensations.

For example, when we eat chocolate or receive a hug, our brain produces a chemical called *dopamine* that makes us feel good and gives us pleasure. We then desire to consume more and more chocolate or receive more hugs to continue experiencing that **sense of well-being**. This can happen with all substances or behaviors that give us pleasure. The constant pursuit can lead to a **strong and uncontrollable** need, i.e., an addiction, which drives us to continuously use a substance, **even if it harms us**.

When the addiction is psychological, we feel a strong emotional desire to use a substance. When it is physical, our body needs it to feel good.

## WHY DO PEOPLE BECOME ADDICTED?

The development of an addiction cannot be attributed to a precise cause, as addictions often arise from a **combination of factors and circumstances**. Conditions that may promote the onset of addictions include:

- an unhealthy family and relational environment;
- a disadvantaged economic context;
- exposure to severe sources of stress, trauma, or violence.

These situations often generate **painful, unpleasant, and difficult-to-manage emotions**. To escape this sense of agitation, we may feel the need to **find relief** in something that gives us pleasure. Here the biological factor comes into play, i.e., the brain's predisposition to seek the sensation of pleasure activated by dopamine. The more frequent and continuous the **seeking of the substance**, the higher the likelihood of developing an addiction. These addictions often develop in conjunction **with other mental disorders** such as depression, personality disorders, or anxiety.

It is important to remember that developing **an addiction is not a fault** nor an indicator that one is a bad or wrong person. Addictions arise from **conditions of distress that require help**, not judgment or stigmatization.

## WHICH SUBSTANCES CREATE ADDICTION?

Many substances that can be addictive, including some **illicit substances** such as cocaine, heroin, ecstasy, or cannabis. However, there are also many **legal substances** that can cause addiction, such as:

- nicotine;
- medications;
- alcohol;
- internet and social media;
- gambling;
- food.

Each substance has a different effect, but all act on the **reward and gratification system**. This means that many substances or actions that give pleasure and gratification can also be objects of addiction.

## HOW TO RECOGNIZE AN ADDICTION?

It is not easy to realize that we are developing an addiction. Addictions develop **slowly** over time. However, there are some **signs** that can help you identify it:

- If, for example, you drink a lot of alcohol, gamble often, or spend a lot of time on the internet and are aware of how harmful it is to your life, but cannot limit or stop, you might be addicted.
- If when trying to stop using a substance or a certain behavior, you feel unpleasant symptoms like tremors, nausea, or agitation, you may be facing withdrawal, indicating a possible addiction.
- If you prefer drinking, smoking, playing slots, or being on the internet instead of doing things that were once important to you, like spending time with friends or family, you might be having an addiction.

## ARE THERE DIFFERENCES IN ADDICTIONS BETWEEN MEN AND WOMEN?

In the past, addictions were seen as a phenomenon that concerns only males. Today we know that women can also develop addictions, often with **different characteristics** compared to men. For example, in gambling, women prefer bingo and lotteries, while men prefer skill games, strategy games, or sports betting.

Regarding substance use, it has been observed that women start abusing substances at a **later age** compared to men. Additionally, women tend to develop addictions more quickly. This phenomenon is known as *telescoping*, which may be due to hormonal variations typical of the menstrual cycle, pregnancy, or menopause, differences in women's metabolism, or psychological factors.

Female addictions also have **different effects** compared to those of men, such as:

- increased likelihood of infertility;
- early onset of menopause;
- complications during pregnancy and breastfeeding;
- increased risk of developing breast cancer.

## NEED HELP?

If you realize you have developed an addiction, **you should not feel ashamed or wrong**. Unfortunately, it is a condition that affects many people, more than you might think.

**Remember that you can overcome addictions!** The first step is to **become aware** of your condition and **have the will** to stop abusing. It is then necessary to seek help from healthcare professionals. You can talk to your general practitioner, who will be able to guide you to the most suitable path for you.

If you live in Tuscany, you can contact **Ser.D., Services for Addictions**, which offers specialist medical and psychological advice and assistance. Ser.D. can help with issues related to the use of **legal and illegal substances** (such as alcohol, tobacco, medications, heroin, cocaine, cannabinoids, synthetic substances, etc.) as well as other forms of addiction, such as gambling and internet or video addictions. Your family or friends can also contact Ser.D. for assistance. **Access is free and privacy is guaranteed.**

For information, you can call the **toll-free number 800 39 40 88**, active from Monday to Friday from 9.00 am to 1.00 pm and from 3.00 pm to 5.00 pm.

There is also a **Gambling Listening Center** active throughout Tuscany at the **toll-free number 800 88 15 15**, operational from 9.00 am to 2.00 pm, Monday to Friday. If you prefer, you can also send an email to [ascolto.giocodazzardo@regione.toscana.it](mailto:ascolto.giocodazzardo@regione.toscana.it).

## ADDRESSES AND CONTACTS



**ACISJF Firenze ODV**  
Stazione S.M. Novella  
via Valfonda, 1 - Firenze  
055 294635  
segreteria@acisjf-firenze.it  
www.acisjf-firenze.it



**Associazione Nosotras**  
via Faenza, 103 - Firenze  
055 2776326  
donnenosotras@gmail.com  
www.nosotras.it



**Associazione Progetto Arcobaleno APS**  
via del Leone, 9 - Firenze  
055 288150  
arcobaleno@progettoarcobaleno.it  
www.progettoarcobaleno.it



**Gli Anelli Mancanti**  
via Palazzuolo, 8 - Firenze  
055 2399533  
glianellimancanti@yahoo.it  
www.anellimancanti.com



**ItaliaHello**  
via Pier Capponi, 69 - Firenze  
331 2170145  
info@italiahello.it  
www.italiahello.it



**Le Curandaie APS**  
via Domenico Cirillo, 2L - Firenze  
055 5385341  
info@lecurandaie.it  
www.lecurandaie.it



Progetto approvato con D.D.R. 13511/23  
con il contributo di Ministero del Lavoro  
e delle Politiche Sociali e Regione Toscana