

[Reef Karim, M.D.](#)

Founder/Medical Director, The Control Center for Addictions;
UCLA Semel Institute for Neuroscience; Media Personality

Amy Winehouse, Celebrity Addiction and Death

I don't know Amy Winehouse, but I do know addiction.

There's been a lot of talk about how she died and what circumstances led to her death. We've all heard the reports of multiple rehab admissions, on and off recovery, public "altered" appearances where it was obvious she was taking something, etc.

Winehouse's death is obviously a terrible tragedy, and her celebrity status made her recovery that much harder. Why? Because there's no privacy, and there's a great deal of pressure to start working again before you are mentally and physically ready because so many incomes depend on you (managers, agents, publicists, musicians, etc.). You receive "special" care that is not good care, and the public enjoys watching or hearing "drama" -- and sober people just aren't that dramatic compared to when they're using.

I was treating a rock star once who told me something that I'll never forget: He said, "When I'm loaded, I'm a better news story, people talk about me, I'm popular, I'm important. And when I'm sober, nobody seems to care because there's no story. I'm not doing anything newsworthy. To me, that's the hardest part about staying sober."

A big part of recovery, of battling addiction, is to make a lifestyle modification -- to change your biological, psychological, social and spiritual life. The goal is to look internally and find a sense of purpose, find out why you do what you do, to develop new skills and experience positive things. And whether you're a celebrity or CEO or just a man or woman with a family, it requires you to take time out from your normal existence.

We've all heard the tragic stories of well-known people who die from some type of drug, alcohol or prescription pills. And most people assume that the drugs cause someone to instantly "overdose," which means a rapid death. We hear about somebody going to sleep and never waking up.

But people don't just die from addiction because they overdose or stop breathing or go into cardiac arrest. The constant use of drugs and alcohol compromises your entire body systems, making you more susceptible to pneumonia and many other "addiction-related" problems. Most people don't realize that addiction doesn't usually just kill rapidly, it more often causes a slow death but one that still has a life expectancy far less than the average person. Problems with nutrient absorption, neurotoxicity, mental health issues, cardiac impairment, immune system dysfunction, lung and respiratory problems, kidney dysfunction, the list goes on and on. Addiction, untreated or not well treated, robs you of your ability to think and the ability for your body to function. Over time, you develop physiological and mental health problems that can lead to severe impairment and death.

The next time somebody announces "drugs weren't involved in this person's premature death" when the individual has a history of abusing drugs and alcohol, think again. It's easier to see the connection when the death is sudden and there's a pile of pill bottles on the night stand. But, more common, the drugs and alcohol put the person in a compromised state of health that eventually led to their death.