

## Light Paper: Addiction



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### Consider This Story

Gina is a 52-year-old who lives in Washington state. She has a good life. Gina is happily married and is a present mother in her three children's lives. She has parents and a family that loves her and wants the best for her. She works in social services and is actively involved in her community. She is a daughter, a mother, a sister, a wife, and a friend to many.

However, what someone wouldn't be able to tell from Gina's current life is that she struggled with a substance use disorder for many years. Suffering from a physically and emotionally abusive relationship, Gina turned to drugs, specifically methamphetamine, more commonly known as meth, to deal with her feelings of loneliness and worthlessness. She would tell her family she was going to the store and return three days later after a bender. Worried about her well-being and reaching a breaking point, her family told her she had to get treatment. While she was on her path toward recovery, her children were cared for by her parents, sister, and brother-in-law. Gina went through treatment and had to do years of therapy to undo the beliefs society had reinforced about her worth as a person because of her addiction. With the support of her family, community, and professionals, Gina was able to become substance-free and has remained so for over ten years.

In her current role, she now walks the same hospital hallways that she did when she was struggling with her addiction. This time, though, she gets to help women struggling with addiction find the resources they need to recover. Her past gives her a unique lens to know that you must meet those struggling where they are. She has used her lived experience to help over a thousand women who are receiving treatment stay with their babies and reunify with any of their children who are in the system. Gina has not relapsed since becoming clean and lives every day grateful for the second chance life has granted her.

## Summary

This paper will explore the topic of addiction, explicitly reviewing how we can reframe societal perspectives around substance use disorders to reduce stigma, the state of addiction nationally and in North Carolina, and actionable steps we can take to pivot towards ensuring the health of individuals in North Carolina to create safe and thriving families. Addiction is defined by the American Society of Addiction Medicine (ASAM) as a “treatable, chronic medical disease involving complex interactions among brain circuits, genetics, the environment, and an individual’s life experiences.” We will emphasize the fact that addiction is a medical disease and how adopting this framework can improve outcomes for all those overcoming the condition and can increase both individual and family well-being. This paper will also discuss addictions comorbidity to other conditions, such as past trauma and mental health disorders.

It would be remiss not to highlight the racially and ethnically charged perspectives around addiction in the US. We will touch on some policies and movements that disproportionately affect people of color.

Ultimately, this paper serves as an overview of the issue of addiction in the US and comes to one clear conclusion: those who are working to overcome a substance use disorder are worthy of support and, with additional support, can live prosperous lives.

This paper will end the discussion with four crucial actionable items:

- Increasing evidence-based substance use disorder practices and treatments that weave in the concept of cultural humility.
- In recognizing the high comorbidity between mental health disorders and substance use disorders, increasing the access and infrastructure to both entities.
- Promoting in-patient care programs that keep babies with their mothers.
- Listening to people’s stories can help us gain perspective, allowing us to approach addiction with empathy rather than judgment.

## Introduction

While some of the stories we give in the Light Papers are fictional, this story is a real-life example of how addiction can affect someone’s life. This is the story of Gina WasseMiller, which is captured in the Institute for Family’s film, [Being Gina](#). Gina’s story exemplifies the notion that those battling addiction can reach a healthier life and become substance-free. Fortunately, Gina had support in place to aid in her recovery journey, yet what about the people fighting substance use disorders who do not have familial support in place or know where to find the resources they need? How can we best support individuals to avoid parents being separated from their children while they are in recovery?

In this paper, we will delve into these questions, discussing how we can and should create practices that better support all individuals who are on their path to recovery from substance use disorders.