

Addictions

“To thine own self be true.”

– *William Shakespeare*

We are all pleasure seekers. There are pleasure centers located in the human brain, which, when activated, are associated with feelings of euphoria. This happens to us every day. During the day we go through naturally occurring periods when we feel comfortable, secure, happy, and fulfilled – and this is followed by periods when more negative feelings are aroused (anxiety, insecurity, discomfort). We humans are highly reinforced by positive feelings of pleasure. We want to experience euphoria again and again. Fortunately, that’s not all there is to life.

Addictive behavior can be seen as an attempt to control our daily cycles by maximizing pleasurable feelings and decreasing the frequency of negative feelings. At first we may even succeed for a while in doing this, but our basic nature has a way of catching up with us. We probably need our down phases of the daily cycle as much as we need the more positive ones – if for no other reason than that the negative parts of the cycle help us appreciate the positive ones even more. Our negative experiences strengthen us and help us to become survivors. They assist us in learning wisdom and integrity. There are few things in nature which are not cyclical. Attempts to find constant pleasure through addictive behavior are always futile. The negative phase always revisits us and brings balance back into our lives. There is no escaping our basic nature. And there is no escaping the escalating and debilitating results of the quest for constant pleasure.

Addiction is an uncontrolled search for gratification through a relationship with an substance or activity to the exclusion of other more diverse life experiences. The substance or activity with which the addict forms a relationship varies with each person. Common sources of addiction are alcohol, tobacco, illegal drugs, prescription medication, sex, love, food, shopping (and shoplifting), gambling, television, computers, videogames, pornography, and work.

The addictive quest for pleasure has some defining characteristics. Many addictions aim to increase **arousal**. This is the all-powerful feeling that might come from cocaine, amphetamines, the first few drinks of alcohol, shoplifting, sexual acting out, videogames, or gambling. This omnipotent feeling, however, is eventually undermined when the addict realizes that a dependency has been formed. A feeling of fear replaces the feeling of being all powerful – fear of losing the source of addiction and fear that others will find out how powerless the person actually is. Negative experiences always accompany the positive feelings the addict is seeking.

Other addictions aim to increase **satiation**. This is the feeling of happiness and fulfillment that might be achieved through the use of heroin, marijuana, tranquilizers, pain medication, watching TV, or overeating. The feeling of satiation serves to camouflage a person’s underlying pain. Again, however, negative feelings always show themselves. The person who strives for satiation not only re-experiences the underlying pain when the feeling of satiation wears off, but also experiences the grief accompanied by the loss of the satiation high. Satiation addicts must increase the dosage of the drug or the frequency of the addictive acting out behavior to cover up their original pain. The quest for a satiation high takes over the person’s life until, ultimately, the pain returns in the form of despair.

Note that satiation reflects our quest for pleasure while arousal exemplifies our quest for power. Pleasure and power are two primitive behaviors and are experienced by children in the earliest years of life when the range of experiences is focused largely on forming one’s sense of self. Adulthood brings us beyond

these simple levels of experience into a more complex, diverse and meaningful way of relating to the world. When we move past pleasure and power, we are able to form intimate relationships with other adults, to contribute to society, to understand our responsibilities to others, and to incorporate moral convictions into our actions. Addictive behavior prevents us from achieving these more complex levels of behavior found in adulthood.

Addictive behavior usually contains the following components:

Acting Out Behavior: Addicts create a mood through a change in their behavior that sets the stage to go into the addictive high. Thus, sex addicts will purchase pornographic material. Drug addicts will make the call to the drug dealer. These “acting out” behaviors are a preliminary part of the addictive process and serve to shift the addict’s mood. During the acting out stage, the addict feels the illusion of being powerful and in control.

The Illusion of Nurturance: Most of us seek ways to achieve nurturance in times of stress, but for the addict, the nurturing is temporary and does not allow the person to find ways to solve problems in a realistic way. Addiction is a way of living in which life’s problems are avoided in favor of the search for the next high. Although addicts may understand rationally that addictive behavior will not solve the problem, they develop their own logic to rationalize the continuation of the addiction.

The Addictive Object Becomes the Person’s Primary Relationship: Addicts seek to meet their emotional and intimacy needs through achieving a high until, eventually, this becomes their most important relationship. They experience a mood change and come to believe that their emotional needs have been met. This is the tragedy of addiction because the addict shuts out other people, the community, and the search for spiritual answers – the real way to deal with life’s issues in a healthy manner. Other people are used, not for true relationship, but merely as props in pursuit of the addiction.

The Addict Withdraws from the World: The normal way to achieve intimacy is to reach out to other people. For the addict, where the primary relationship is with the addictive substance, the illusion of intimacy means pursuing the addictive high and excluding other people. The high gives the feeling of warmth, control, and well-being – and the feeling that the need for intimacy has been met. Unfortunately, the longer the addict engages in this process, the more lonely and isolated he or she becomes. When the pain of isolation becomes intense, the stage is set for the addict to engage in more acting out behavior. The pattern becomes entrenched, and escaping it is difficult.

Addicts Trust the High More than Other People: Addicts begin to trust the mood change that comes from engaging in addictive behavior. They feel isolated from other people and find that others might not always come through for them. The high, on the other hand, is consistent and always available. They trust the high more than they trust others. Unfortunately, because the addicts have not engaged in the normal interactions that occur between people, they lack the experience in working through the nuances of relationships in order to find ways of getting their needs met through others. This entrenches them in the belief that their addiction is their only friend. It works every time, while friends are not always there.

Recovering from Addiction

Coming to terms with addiction may be the most important journey of a person’s life. Because the addict’s primary relationship is with the addictive substance and everything else is secondary, only used

to pursue the addictive high, the addict's safety, security and life dreams may suffer. The tragedy of addiction is that people can lose their families, friends, money, homes, jobs, and way of life. The single-mindedness of the addictive pursuit prevents the addict from dealing with life in a more mature, complex, and responsible way.

One way of coming to terms with addiction is to work with a trained therapist. Because addiction is such an entrenched pattern in one's life and essentially an emotional issue, individual talk therapy may not provide all the support one needs to come to terms with the problem, but it can serve as a good starting point. The therapist may refer the addicted person to a twelve-step program or other recovery resources as an adjunct to therapy. AA, NA, and other groups are free and can be essential to the process of recovery.

The first phase of recovery is to admit the addiction – and this is very difficult for many people. Some people may need to experience the loss of their life dreams and expectations before they can admit that they are addicted to a substance or activity. The addict must then make the commitment not to engage in the addictive behavior in the future. They must move from the primitive quest for power and pleasure to more meaningful, responsible adult behaviors. Part of this process is making amends to those who have been hurt by the person's addiction. Another part is to learn to draw from the nurturance and pleasure provided by other people – friends, family and the larger community. Another is to get in touch with one's spiritual self and the normal human desire to connect with things larger than oneself.

The addict must search for his or her healthy self and try to stay there always. Life becomes a series of daily choices – to choose the behaviors of the healthy self and not those of the addictive self. Coming to terms with addiction, finally, means exploring the beauty, joy and excitement of the full and complete person that all of us have the capacity to become.

“Not I, nor anyone else, can travel that road for you. You must travel it yourself.”
– *Walt Whitman*

<Sidebar>

Factors That Place a Person At Risk for Addiction

- As a child, having addicted parents (or other adults)
- As a child, having too much, too little or uncertain love, discipline or safety
- A tendency to find others who are also addictive
- Feelings of insecurity, loneliness or being different
- Difficulty using positive emotions such as love, joy or intimacy in times of trouble
- An inability to self-reflect and self-soothe.

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Working Through Life's Challenges...

We all face problems, stressors and anxieties in our everyday lives. This is a fundamental part of the human condition. There is no escaping this basic truth. Indeed, challenges help us to grow. The normal process is to perceive a problem and then bring our emotional and thinking abilities into play in order to solve the problem. We can draw on our own legacy of experiences, and we can find support from our life

partners, friends, the community, society's body of knowledge, and spiritual sources. Faced with a problem, we experience some anxiety – and this uncomfortable feeling motivates us to solve the problem in order to find our balance again. In the process, we become more flexible and more adept at dealing with problems in the future. As we mature, we discover that problems are not insurmountable – and we get better at problem-solving.

Consider, however, the addictive way of dealing with problems. The addict, too, faces life's challenges. Rather than easing the anxieties associated with a problem by drawing on a diversity of healthy resources for a solution, the addict knows that ultimately there is always the alcohol, the drug, the food, the gambling, the sexual outlet, the work, any addictive substance or activity which will ease the anxiety. Thus, the problems are never solved in the real world, and the addict instead develops the illusion that the problem has been solved. The pain is gone and there is no perceived need to work on solving the real problems.

Unfortunately, it is the children, the partner, the family and friends of the addict who must suffer. Their needs for comfort, nurturance and safety are compromised, since the addict's primary relationship is not with them, but with the addictive substance. Instead of finding true meaning in life, the addict pursues an illusory and primitive quest for the feeling of pleasure and power over life's challenges – and it is those who truly matter in the addict's life who suffer greatly.