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Addiction Medicine & Psychiatry



Different Addictions Share Common Threads

What causes addiction and how do we stop it?

Unfortunately, the psycho-babble politically correct answers that play well in the media, news items about scientists splitting serotonin molecules or analyzing brain receptor sites, and clinical vignettes about therapists blaming “oedipal shame” and prescribing “therapy for the inner child –” may be interesting to read, but do not help the suffering addicts or the people who have to deal with their problems.

What is the problem?

For more practical answers, let’s look at some questions and insights from recovering alcoholics & other addicts.

Q. What causes addiction?

A. Nobody knows.

Q. What keeps addiction going?

A. Addicts and their co-dependents do; i.e. addiction is an inside job.

Recovering addicts concede that their addictions, though shaped by genetics, psychological strain and personal life events, are basically a matter of brain chemistry. But they also point out that for the time being, the only thing we can deal with effectively are the addicts’ behaviors. They say that addicts are people who have learned how to give themselves a quick fix or an easy high (1) when they want to change how they feel or (2) when they need to ignore real-life problems. More importantly, they emphasize that addicts are willing to these behaviors again and again, even when they already “know” (on a subconscious level) that it will get them in trouble again.

Although different types of addicts prefer their own 12-Step groups (alcoholics, for example, go to Alcoholics Anonymous), addicts who are in my recovery group therapy sessions say that all addictions are alike “because when we decide to get high, we all want the same thing, i.e. change how we feel, and to ignore problems.”

To support this conclusion, recovering addicts explain that when recovering addicts “quit on their own” without changing their personality and lifestyle, they usually “switch” to another type of addiction (from alcohol to gambling to drugs, for example); and because the goal they seek can be achieved not only by using drugs, or food, but also through compulsive behaviors, such as gambling, or even by just having a thought or making a certain wish.

Here are some examples:

You are a “dry” alcoholic. You just closed a big business deal. You may feel scared, or you may feel like celebrating. Either way, you decide to have a drink or snort cocaine because you know it will change how you feel.

Within minutes, your brain chemistry is changing. You feel better. So you drink or snort some more, and soon you don’t feel anything. That’s why you are an alcoholic/drug addict.

You’re a divorced, middle-aged homemaker with a “weight problem.” Your daughter just called from college. She thinks she is pregnant (and she is not sure who the father of the baby is).

You feel terrific – and terrible. (You wanted to become a grandmother, but not like this.) So you pull down the blinds, unhook the phone, turn on the soaps and stuff yourself with food . . . or you head for the mall and shop until you drop.

Either way, you soon feel different. But you also gain weight or you max out your Visa. That’s why you are an overeater – or a chronic spender.

You are a non-drinker, and you don’t do drugs, but you are a gambler. You just got a promotion and a plush new office. You feel lucky. But you also feel scared. Can I handle the new job? You are getting depressed. So, you call the Las Vegas casino where you are a “regular.”

From the moment that you hear the familiar routine, you start feeling better. The voice on the phone verifies your credit line. “The next flight leaves your city in one hour,” you’re told; “a first-class seat has been reserved; and our limo will meet you at the airport.”

By the time you hang up the phone, your brain (chemistry) is on a roll: your pulse is up, the blues are gone, the fix is on. In your mind’s eye you hear the big-shot sounds of the casino, the serotonin high-five “Hi, how are you?” of old pals, the bouncing roll of the dice, the rush of a winning streak.

Because you are able – and willing – to keep turning that mental trick whenever you want to/need to, you are a compulsive gambler.

You’re a sex addict. You just received your tax refund. You’re elated, but you don’t know how to spend it. You are nervous and depressed. So, you call an old girlfriend. “Hi Hon, I know I haven’t called you in a long time. And this is short notice, but how about lunch?”

“Sure,” she coos, “I remember you well. Yeah, let’s have lunch, and let’s spend the afternoon in that little motel, like old times!”

Wow! Your carotid pulses are flooding your brain. By the time you hang up, the blues are gone because your self-induced brain chemistry is going full tilt.

What’s the solution?

So, when you ask recovering addicts “How did you stop your addictions?,” their answer is: “By accepting personal responsibility for the drugs and thoughts we put into our brains, and by learning what other things we can do when we feel the urge/need for a fix.”

Sure, they concede, addiction is ultimately caused by chemical reactions in your brain. But the effects that you seek – euphoria/sedation, stimulation/satiation, etc. – can be triggered not only by extrinsic drugs that you swallow, inhale or inject – but also by intrinsic drugs that your brain manufactures – on its own – when you start to think certain thoughts, or when you initiate certain behaviors, like calling Las Vegas, hiring a hooker or going to the candy store.

“Either way,” recovering people say, “we addicts trigger our own brain reactions.”

Why, then, do addicts keep repeating their drug/food abuse or their addictive behaviors? Over the past 30 years, thousands of addicts have given me countless answers. Here are two of my favorites:

- (1) “Doc, I think I get high because I don’t want my life to be as boring as your life probably is.”
- (2) “I drink because it makes warts go away – from other people’s faces.”

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