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Addiction Medicine & Psychiatry



Repetition-Compulsion is the Core of Addiction

The psychodynamic core of addiction is the repetition-compulsion, i.e. the alcoholics/addicts repeat the same self-destructive behaviors over and over, in spite of their personal resolve not to do it.

The following scenarios illustrate the commonalities and the progression of symptoms, from use . . . to abuse . . .to compulsive addiction.

Alcoholism – The Beginning

- I drink at parties with friends.
- I like to drink on weekends.
- Sometimes I get drunk, but it's fun.
- Sometimes it isn't fun, but I can still control it.
- Sometimes I wish I drank less.
- I've become a daily drinker, but I only get drunk on weekends.

The Middle

- My family and friends are complaining about my drinking, so I have to really control it.
- Now I privately wonder: Maybe I do drink too much; maybe I should quit.
- Sometimes I don't seem to be able to help the way I drink.
- How come I got drunk again last night, even though I intended not to?
- I'm an executive, I'm at a business convention, and I got drunk again last night; this is harming my reputation. I don't even remember what happened.
- That's enough! I'm on the wagon again – but this time for good.

The End

- (Two months later) I can't believe this. Last night I was honored as Man of the Year. This morning I wake up in a strange bed with people who are definitely below my station in life. If my spouse (lover, minister, parents, etc.) knew about this, I'd be finished.
- I can't understand this. I feel like I'm driven to do it.

Sexual addiction – The Beginning

- I like sex. I keep thinking about it.
- It's getting to be a constant preoccupation.
- I seem to want to do it more and more.
- My spouse/lover says it's getting to be a problem.

The Middle

- Sometimes I don't even enjoy doing it.
- Sometimes I do it with people I don't even like.
- Sometimes I wish I hadn't done it.
- I'm at a sales convention. This morning I wake up in bed with two crummy-looking strangers. . . I better get out of here before they wake up.
- That's it! No more sex, except at home.

The End

- (Two months later) I can't believe this: Last night I gave the keynote speech, then I went to a bar. This morning I wake up in a strange place with a prostitute. If my spouse (lover, boss, priest, children, parents, etc.) knew about this, I'd be finished.
- I can't understand this – I feel like I'm driven to do it.

The common dynamic

The progression is the same: For alcoholics/drug addicts, from the first drink/ drug to full-blown addiction; for gamblers, from the first bet to bankruptcy; for overeaters/anorexics, it's bingeing, dieting, overeating.

The common psychodynamic is a compulsion, which is repeated in spite of all "common sense" resolutions to the contrary, and in the face of repeated negative consequences. The addicts and the people around them handle all this with denial, self-pity – or even humor, as long as they can.

The comedian Nipsy Russell told me a story about his Uncle Leroy. One day at a family gathering

Uncle Leroy's harried wife was berating him; "Leroy, what compels you to drink like this?" Uncle Leroy replied, "Nothing compels me, Honey. I'm strictly a volunteer."

The family laughed, and you probably chuckled when you read this. But the clinical truth is that in addiction, there are no volunteers. (It is not likely that anybody has ever purposefully set out to become an addict.) The repetition-compulsion continues on until the patient undergoes a personality change, usually through a combination of 12-Step work and therapy.

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