

“Understanding Our Addictions”

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Alcohol - Caffeine - Compulsive Overeating - Dieting - Drugs - Exercise - Fishing - Food - Gambling - Internet - Love - Lottery - Nicotine - Pornography - Prescription Meds - Relationships - Sex - Shopping - Spending - Television - Video Games - Work
(Z---- Hmm... there must be something starting with Z to which people have become addicted!)

The list is probably endless, if we are willing to be really honest with ourselves. Concepts traditionally associated with chemical dependency have - rightfully or wrongfully - been extended to include almost any activity or practice with the capacity to grab hold of us and gradually command more of our attention, indeed our lives, than we would otherwise willingly surrender. And maybe that's really the common denominator behind all compulsive use or activity disorders, regardless of whether we call this one an addiction, or that one simply a bad habit.

In reality, true addiction typically involves fundamental changes in brain chemistry and function that lead inevitably to negative shifts in thoughts and perceptions, values and priorities, world view, behavior and, eventually, personality itself. Purists may say that to be considered an addiction there must be an external substance i.e. "drug" that somehow gets into the system and wreaks havoc. I'm not so sure about that. I've seen how a physiological craving for the stimulation and/or soothing that the brain's pleasure chemicals provide drives a compulsive spender to purchase on bad credit an extravagant item s/he doesn't need, at the risk of finally losing a frustrated spouse at the end of her/his rope.

This month we will take a rather non-scientific look at some dynamics common to most, if not all, compulsive practices. Some practices may have begun as harmlessly as a hobby, while others felt risky and dangerous from the start. What makes any practice or activity begin to look and feel like an addiction is the series of gradual or rapid changes that occur in ourselves, or loved ones, as the 'thing' - whatever it is - takes more and more of our time and attention away from our lives and the people around us. As with so many things in life, the first step has to do with gaining awareness and understanding.



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PROGRESSION

An early, telltale sign that any practice or activity may be developing into a problem is if it seems to be growing, increasing, or otherwise 'morphing' into something more than it used to be, and not in a good way. And not only once. Typically, whatever level of activity the practice is at, if it's going to become an addiction, it will continue to grow and change - almost never for the better. If you are able to recognize a negative pattern and curb it, cut back or moderate it to a level that feels legitimately manageable and sustainable - indefinitely - you probably caught it before it got out of hand. If not, it may signal danger.

LOSS OF CONTROL

A pattern of failed attempts to curb or stop behavior, once self-identified as problematic (the self part is the key), marks a growing concern as frustrating and defeating as anything gets. Unfortunately, with many habits, whether leaving work on time, drinking alcohol or wasting hours surfing the net, the process is so gradual early on (when we still have some control), we fail to notice that we are losing control at all. The first noticeable sign is often a pile of broken promises to self and/or loved ones that one would think would send a clear warning that something is wrong. Unfortunately, that's not always the case.

RATIONALIZATION

The single most powerful force that can push even a harmless habit toward addiction is our sometimes relentless desire to view a subtle, or even blatant, truth as something other than what it actually is. Whether we call it denial, delusion or rationalization, every time we attempt to distort some piece of reality to protect ourselves from an uncomfortable truth we take another tiny step toward the big lie. "It's not that bad..." "I can control it..." "I'll never let it get to that point..." Any of these self-talk statements may be true at the moment. But if, or when, we continue to hold to such statements, in the face of observable progression of the activity to the point of beginning to lose control, we are no longer dealing with rational truth, but rather denial. Art Woodard, a prominent Connecticut substance abuse professional and trainer, created an acronym for denial that is ever more telling:

Don't
Even
Notice
I
Am
Lying

"A Family Affair"

In what may be fairly seen as one of life's greater ironies, the most common form of obsessive thinking / compulsive behavior disorder is one that actually surrounds and engulfs (at least) one loved one of every other addiction. (You can do the math.) Close friends, lovers and family members of compulsive gamblers, substance abusers, spendor/debtors, internet pornography addicts, and the like, share some common perceptions, feelings and behaviors that are often nearly as painful and disabling as those of their dysfunctional loved ones.



The psycho-babble term for this set of problems is known as "*co-dependency*", the dynamics of which are similar to many of their counterparts in the more traditional forms of addiction. They may include embarrassment, guilt and shame that often show up as hiding, minimizing, rationalizing or denying the existence or severity of the loved one's problem. This can lead to a sense of loss of what is normal, true and real, especially for children living in a household caught up in the whirlwind of the addiction / co-dependency equation. There is also a lot of free-flowing anger, self-blaming and projecting of blame (at times simultaneously), as well as anxiety and depression that frequently leads to the development of one's own forms of self-destructive habit(s) as s/he tries to cope with the pain and chaos that abounds.

The major differentiating factor between addiction and co-dependency is that, for loved ones of people with compulsive use disorders, their problems stem from mostly well intentioned, but ultimately non-productive and increasingly desperate, attempts to stop, control or cope with their beloved addict's destructive behaviors. Consequently, the fundamentally reactive nature of co-dependency comes with its own unique aspects of frustration, loss of control and sense of powerlessness.

The first, and therefore most important, task in recovery from co-dependency is coming to terms with, and accepting, a difficult - yet fundamental - truth. Although you didn't cause your loved one's problems, and you can neither stop nor control them, only one individual is responsible for every one of your perceptions, feelings, words, actions and decisions in response to those problems - right or wrong- and you face that individual every morning in the bathroom mirror. Once you get straight about whose issues belong to whom, then you can begin to work toward regaining your own strength and hope, in spite of whatever has been your experience. It's not usually something that is best taken on alone. Help is available, and it's not hard to find. Gathering up the willingness to reach out may be another story.

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If any of this information promotes thought, concern, worry or even anger and resentment about your circumstances, or those of a loved one, give Solutions EAP a call and let's talk about it. We're only a phone call away at 800-526-3485 and our website is www.solutions-eap.com