

[PDF] The Addictive Personality: Understanding The Addictive Process And Compulsive Behavior

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Description:

About the Author Craig M. Nakken, MSW, CCDP, LCSW, LMFT, is an author, lecturer, trainer, and family therapist specializing in the treatment of addiction. With over twenty years of working experience in the areas of addiction and recovery, Nakken presently has a private therapy practice in St. Paul, Minnesota.

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Part 1

Addiction as a Process

Over the years, addiction has been described in many different ways—a moral weakness, a lack of willpower, an inability to face the world, a physical sickness, and a spiritual illness. If you are a family member or a friend of a practicing addict, you may have more colorful ways of describing addiction. However, addiction can be more accurately described and defined in the following way:

Nearly all human beings have a deep desire to feel happy and to find peace of mind and soul. At times in our lives, most of us find this wholeness of peace and beauty, but then it slips away, only to return at another time. When it leaves us, we feel sadness and even a slight sense of mourning. This is one of the natural cycles of life, and it's not a cycle we can control.

To some extent, we can help these cycles along, but for the most part they're uncontrollable—all of us must go through them. We can either accept these cycles and learn from them or fight them, searching instead for elusive happiness.

Addiction can be viewed as an attempt to control these uncontrollable cycles. When addicts use a particular object, such as a substance or an event to produce a desired mood change, they believe they can control these cycles, and at first they can. Addiction, on its most basic level, is an attempt to control and fulfill this desire for happiness.

Addiction must be viewed as a process that is progressive. Addiction must be seen as an illness that undergoes continuous development from a definite, though often unclear, beginning toward an end point.

We can draw a strong comparison between addiction and cancer. For us to understand all the different forms of cancer, we must first understand what they all have in common. All cancers share a similar process: the uncontrolled multiplying of cells. Similarly, we must first understand what all addictions and addictive processes have in common: the out-of-control and aimless searching for wholeness, happiness, and peace through a relationship with an object or event. No matter what the addiction is, every addict engages in a relationship with an object or event in order to produce a desired mood change, state of intoxication, or trance state.

- The alcoholic experiences a mood change while drinking at the neighborhood bar.
- The food addict experiences a mood change by bingeing or starving.
- The addictive gambler experiences a mood change by placing bets on football games and then watching the action on television.
- The shoplifter experiences a mood change when stealing clothing from a department store.
- The sex addict experiences a mood change while browsing in a pornographic bookstore.
- The addictive spender experiences a mood change by going on a shopping spree.
- The workaholic experiences a mood change by staying at work to accomplish another task even though he or she is needed at home.

Although all of the objects or events described are vastly different, they all produce desired mood changes in the addicts who engage in them.

Types of Highs

Addicts are attracted to certain types of mood changes or highs. Harvey Milkman and Stanley

Sunderwirth, in *Craving for Ecstasy: The Consciousness & Chemistry of Escape*, speak of different but specific addictive highs to which people are attracted: arousal, satiation, and fantasy. Arousal and satiation are the most common, followed by fantasy, which is part of all addictions.

Both arousal and satiation are attractive, cunning, baffling, and powerful highs. Arousal comes from amphetamines, cocaine, ecstasy, and the first few drinks of alcohol, and from the behaviors of gambling, sexual acting out, spending, stealing, and so on. Arousal causes sensations of intense, raw, unchecked power and gives feelings of being untouchable and all-powerful. It speaks directly to the drive for power. (This is described more fully in the recovery section, starting on page 65.) Arousal makes addicts believe they can achieve happiness, safety, and fulfillment. Arousal gives the addict the feeling of omnipotence while it subtly drains away all power. To get more power, addicts return to the object or event that provides the arousal and eventually become dependent on it. Arousal addicts become swamped by fear: they fear their loss of power and they fear others will discover how powerless they truly are.

Unlike the power trip of an arousal high, a satiation high gives the addict a feeling of being full, complete, and beyond pain. (Arousal gives the addict the feeling that the pain can be defeated.) Heroin, alcohol, marijuana, Valium, and various behaviors such as overeating, watching TV, or playing slot machines all produce satiation highs.

The satiation high is attractive to certain types of addicts because it numbs the sensations of pain or distress. This pain-free state lasts as long as the individual remains in the mood change created by the addictive ritual. But this type of high attaches the unknowing addict to the grief process. The trance always fades away and sensations always disappear, leaving the addict with the original pain plus the loss of the pleasurable sensations. Over time, satiation addicts are forced to act out more often (if they're behavioral addicts) or increase their dosages (if they're substance abusers). The satiation high gains control over the person, always promising relief from pain. Ultimately, however, the pain returns, deeper and more persistent, until it turns into grief and despair.

Trance

It is helpful to view intoxication—the mood change of the addictive ritual—as a trance state, especially when examining behavioral addictions such as gambling, spending, and sexual acting out.

The trance state is a state of detachment, a state of separation from one's physical surroundings. In the trance, one can live in two worlds simultaneously, floating back and forth between the addictive world and the real world, often without others suspecting it.

The trance allows addicts to detach from the pain, guilt, and shame they feel, making it extremely attractive. The addict becomes increasingly skillful at living in the trance and using it to cover painful feelings. In the process, he or she gets a sense of power and control, but also becomes dependent on the trance, which is part of the progression of the addictive process.

The addict views the trance state as a solution to a problem. "Gambling allowed me to be with people without really being with them," said one compulsive gambler, whose acting out became uncontrollable after her husband died. The trance solved her grief and sorrow. It filled up her emptiness. She felt no pain as long as she was in the casino. Addiction and the trance offered her a solution, and she used it as long as her savings and insurance monies held out. Then she was forced

to confront the reality of her losses, and the blow was even more devastating. Not only had she lost her husband but also the money they had put aside to support her. Addiction takes and takes, and then takes some more.

Our attraction to trance-like sensations grows out of our natural desire for transcendence to contact and live within spiritual principles. It is our desire to reconnect with the divine. The sensations of the trance produce a feeling in the individual that connection has taken place. It creates a virtual reality in which the spiritual experience seems real, but is in fact only illusionary. True spiritual experiences give us increased meaning and the skills to connect with meaning again, with healing and compassion. They give us a stronger belief in relationships and humanity. After experiencing the quasi-spiritual experience of the addictive trance, people are left with the pain and anxiety they were trying to escape, in addition to the emptiness created when the soul realizes that no true connection has taken place.

Thus, the trance state is a part of the definition of addiction as a spiritual illness. Addiction is an illness in which people believe in and seek spiritual connection through objects and behaviors that can only produce temporary sensations. These repeated, vain attempts to connect with the Divine produce hopelessness, fear, and grieving that further alienate the addict from spirituality and humanity.

Extending the Addiction Field

Addiction has been viewed in a very limited way, mainly because the treatment of addiction is a relatively young field. Addiction treatment on any sizable scale began with Alcoholics Anonymous in 1935, which concerned itself with alcoholism, a specific form of addiction. In addition, while most fields of study start with a general knowledge of a subject that gradually becomes more specific, our knowledge about addiction started with a specific form of addiction that gradually has been broadened to help people with many types of addiction. Moreover, the addiction treatment field was not started by a group of professionals, but by people who suffered from one specific form of addiction. As more about the nature of addiction was learned from these pioneers, it was found that their principles of recovery could also help people with other addictions. Thus came the start of Gamblers Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous, Overeaters Anonymous, Sex Addicts Anonymous, Shoplifters Anonymous, Spenders Anonymous, and other Twelve Step self-help groups.

Why do certain principles of recovery work so effectively for all of these different groups? The apparent reason is that the same illness, addiction, is being treated. We are starting to see that there are many forms of addiction; though they are different, they have core similarities. In the follow...

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