

The acting out helps avoid the negative feelings. Life takes on a singular focus- the pursuit of the addiction. This is part of the insanity of the addictive process.

Normally, people get emotional needs met by reaching out to other people. The addict, tends to withdraw and isolate himself. As this process continues, the addict feels even more hopeless about his ability to ever have a meaningful relationship with anyone outside of his addictive experience.

The addict hurts, he is lonely and isolated and turns to his addiction for relief. This subsequent mood change will then give the illusion that a need has been met; but the addict has been nurtured by alcohol or drugs, not by the compassion of a loved one. The problem with this aspect of the addictive process is that the feelings of detachment and separation will only drive the addict into greater reliance on their mood-altering experience (more alcohol or drug use). It turns into a vicious cycle, and often leads to calamity and self-destruction.

Another reason the addict becomes separated from people is the reliability of chemical substances. If you take a drug, you are practically guaranteed a mood change. For the addict, alcohol or drugs can be trusted to provide a change in mood. People are not so predictable; sometimes they let you down or are not there when you need them. As a result, the addict learns to trust his addiction more than people. By acting out (alcohol or drug use), the addict experiences a sense of control.

This helps to counteract the feelings of powerlessness deep within. The promise of power in the face of helplessness is the nature of addiction. The addict begins to believe false and empty promises: the promise of relief, of emotional security, the false sense of fulfilment, and of intimacy with the world. Certainly there is a biochemical basis to addictions. *Enkephalins*, and related compounds called *Endorphins*, are pain-killing molecules that are produced naturally in the brain. The strong mood-altering chemicals are structurally similar to opiate drugs and appear to behave in similar ways. The brain can actually produce its own opiates. Individuals can change their brain chemistry by participating in certain mood-altering activities, as well as through ingesting intoxicating substances (legal or illegal drugs). Leaping from an airplane and then free-falling from an altitude of 13,000 feet will produce a chemical change in the brain that is quite similar to taking a hit of cocaine. While interesting and helpful, the chemical explanations for addiction are still not sufficient in and of themselves.

Addictive behaviour has its roots in every aspect of our being. That is why it is so seductive and compelling. Addiction is evident when one becomes progressively unable to control the beginning or end of a need-fulfilling activity like alcohol or drug use. Compulsive behaviour is best understood as an individual's self-defeating adjustment to his environment. It represents a habitual style of coping. But it is a style of coping behaviour from which there is no escape. However, there is hope, even though the pathway to recovery is narrow and long. It is possible to regain control. ***

Bibliography: ***When Good Things Become Addictions", Dr. Grant Martin ****"The Freedom We Crave", Dr. William Lesters *****"The Twelve Steps", Friends in Recovery

Produced by Antonios Maglis (Community Drug Education Officer) Funded by Commonwealth Department of Health & Aged Care

Understanding Addiction



What is addiction?

Whatever the focus (alcohol, drugs, smoking, etc.), addiction means you are out of control. The term addiction, may bring to mind images of drug addicts slumped over a syringe in a darkened alley. Or you may think of an alcoholic staggering down the sidewalk, panhandling for money to buy another bottle.

There are various degrees and stages of addiction. However, there are some essential chemical, psychological, and social common denominators between all forms of habitual behaviours. One of the key determinants in addiction is persistence. You continue with the behaviour in spite of harmful consequences. *

Addiction is a process.

Addiction seldom remains constant. As it changes, it usually takes more and more of a person's energy and resources, to the point that it can become destructive and even fatal. Addiction is a set of experiences that produces changes within the person. The addict, responding to these internal changes, begins to act out in particular ways. As addiction develops, it becomes a way of life. To understand addiction we need to remember something very basic about human nature. We tend to want to do things that are rewarding and positive, and we tend to avoid things which are negative and aversive.

When we experience loss, pain, grief, sadness and other inevitable hurt or negative experiences, then we are more susceptible to forming an addictive behaviour such as alcohol or drug dependency.

Because we want to escape pain, we seek experiences that maximize the positive and eliminate the negative, (for some people, alcohol or drug use, may be some of these experiences).

Since we cannot totally control the cycle of peace and pain in our lives, most of us learn to either accept these cycles or try to be happy all the time.

The addict tries to control these uncontrollable events. When he uses alcohol or drugs, he believes that he can make the pain go away and bring about good feelings whenever he wants. And in the beginning he can be successful. But this is where the process becomes progressive.

Addiction is the out-of-control search for either happiness or the avoidance of pain.

Regardless of the addiction, every addict has a "relationship" with a substance (alcohol or drugs), in order to produce a mood change.

The means by which the mood change is accomplished is called *acting out* (using alcohol or drugs).

By acting out, the addict attempts to create feelings of relaxation, excitement, or fantasy.

The change in mood resulting from the acting out (using alcohol or drugs), gives the addict the illusion of being in control.

The process continues as the addict attempts to make sense out of life. He believes he is being fulfilled by his behaviour (using alcohol or drugs). Because the activity gains access to rewarding feelings, or at least helps escape pain and hurt, the process of using alcohol or drugs is reinforced.

As the addictive cycle continues, the acting out behaviour (using alcohol or drugs), is also a way to escape the shame and guilt created by knowing that he (the addict), is out of control. **

Addiction has a seductive nature.

As the addict continues to engage in his behaviour, a very seductive thing happens. The addict begins to believe that he can be nurtured by alcohol or drugs. This happens because the acting out, whether relaxing, thrill seeking, or fantasy, allows the addict to get temporary relief from the pain and pressure of life.

There is some short-term gain in having access to this mood-altering experience (using alcohol or drugs).

We all have avoided dealing with some of life's unpleasant activities. The difference is that an addiction becomes a lifestyle in which the addict loses control and becomes enmeshed into a habitual avoidance of reality.

The addict tries to nurture himself by avoiding responsibility and denying reality. Gradually, seductively, the addict begins to depend on the addictive process for a sense of nurturing. He looks to the mood change to define who he is.