

## Addiction

### **Enslaved to an addiction?**

It's not a pleasant thought. For most of us - it's very hard to admit to someone else that 'I have an addiction'. Never mind to someone else, it's hard to admit to oneself... "I am addicted to alcohol"... or, "I am addicted to gambling... porn... work... the abuse of prescription drugs... TV... smoking... cocaine... marijuana... procrastination... yelling/venting... sex... coke... eating... or \_\_\_\_\_" (fill in the blank – because there are many things that we can become addicted to). It's a major problem. What families are not afflicted by addictions of some sort? They affect more than just the addict. Addictions enslave the addict and control the lives of those who depend on the addict to fill a role.

Un-dealt with, addictions erode freedom to live, love and be loved. Addictions depersonalize loved ones around the addict and diminish the one addicted. They reinforce sensory cravings like a fire wanting fuel. It's never satisfied. When addictive appetites are indulged they provide progressively diminishing relief and increasing emptiness. They leave one weak, defeated and consumed with bodily urges that eventually control our thoughts, will, emotions and desires. We become slaves to the pursuit of what is depended on to manipulate the altered state we seek. In the end we are a neurotic mess (fancy word for being consumed with managing the unwanted symptoms of our avoidance goals). It's like the cat whose purpose in life is chasing its tail.

When we think of addicts it might conjure images of people under the influence of a mind or mood altering substance, or worse, similar memories from our own past. Depending on how we define addictions, we might find that all of us have or have had some form of addiction. We are used to thinking of addictions as hormone manipulating indulgences, but we can also have avoidance addictions (ie. anxiety-driven behaviors). All psychologically compulsive addictions are 'neurotic' by nature, which means that they are characterized by avoidance. How many of us organize life around avoidance?

We seem to be willing to sacrifice our bodies to relieve pain in our souls, which provides soil for 'addic- tion seeds'. Finding something else that is consuming but less painful than what I want to avoid becomes the goal of a compulsive urge. If we think about it, avoidance is possible **if** we become consumed with something else.

There are two key psychological elements to neurotic addictions: firstly, they involve avoidance of an unwanted reality, and secondly, what is being avoided will be found in oneself (ie. either a negative feeling or desire). When avoidance of symptoms is more important than correction of what is causing them, one becomes vulnerable to form a dependence on whatever works to successfully avoid. We have become addicted when life is being organized around stimuli needed to avoid side effects from withholding what the body craves....

## Help for addictions?

Neurotic addictions are characterized by: 1). a commitment to avoid; and 2). what is being avoided will be found in oneself. When avoidance of symptoms is more important than correction of what causes those symptoms, then one becomes vulnerable to forming a dependence on whatever works to avoid the symptoms. Addictions are easily formed.

If I can become consumed, or fixated, on one thing I can avoid another. Kind of like biting one's lip to avoid the pinch of a needle. Finding something that is consuming yet less painful (maybe even pleasurable?) than what I want to avoid is the goal of avoidance urges. When I am controlled by neurotic urges they are said to be compulsive. A compulsive urge dissociates the behavior or activity from the purpose it serves. Compulsions control us and because their purpose is to avoid we can lose sight of why we do them. To us they are just bad habits.

A compulsion graduates to an addiction when unpleasant physical sensations (side effects) develop from not feeding the body more, and I now feel the need to avoid the body sensations of withdrawal as well as the psychological realities they were initially designed to avoid. An addictive craving depends on stimulation that is sensory (*ie. drugs, alcohol, smoking, adrenalin manipulating lifestyle activities, high risk activities, pornography, chat lines, gambling, food abuse, avoidance activities like consuming television or computer games, etc.*) to manipulate the body for desired states of being. And when the body complains with growing discomfort, with shortened intervals between the complaints, when not feeding the hormone manipulating activity – know that we have created an addiction monster.

There are patterns with addictions and I have organized these into what I refer to as stages. Each stage in the compulsive/addiction cycle is characterized by being consumed with something. What is consuming is different for each of the stages. The purpose of the different behavior patterns in each stage is to avoid and is successful when one is able to maintain dissociation between the behavior and the purpose it serves by remaining fixated on one of the consuming urges in the addiction cycle. As long as avoidance is the guiding motive one just keeps going around and around driven by the different consuming urges and corresponding behaviors. Collateral problems resulting from the addictions and compulsive urges draw attention to the need for handling unmet needs differently. Long-term negative consequences are often what brings a person to give up an addiction.

## Breaking out of addictions?

Breaking out of destructive addictions often **begins with desperation** (*ie. crashing*) and ends when one discovers something more to live for than one's addiction.

Living for the moment is not going to get anyone out of addictions. It's what lands us there. Addicts need hope for more to life... something that transcends finding relief or immediate gratification. The Nike® slogan "Just Do It" is not a good maxim to live by if you are

using it to justify avoiding life – it will feed addictions. Perhaps a story could help illustrate the above...

I remember counselling an alcohol dependent individual who was also afflicted with a fear of being in public places. He seldom went out of the house, and when he did – it was only to get the mail or buy food, and only when he could postpone it no longer. As best I could see, he drank to numb himself from the uncertainty he faced in his marriage, the inadequacy he felt from being unemployed and the thoughts he imagined others were thinking about him. Numbing worked to the degree that he could stay isolated and inebriated. The problem with his 'solution' was that it was very short term. When he was out of booze he had all the same problems he had before but with a few more on top. When sober, his feelings of insecurity and inadequacy were ever greater as was his fear of what others thought. And as a bonus, he had hangovers, less money to pay his bills, and guilt – lots of guilt and lots of fears. He was failing his wife's expectations, who wanted more from him than an alcohol numbed body that consumed the family's basic needs. He called me often and would want to talk about the anxiety he felt in his situation... "Will I ever be free from anxiety? Where's my wife? Will they (CFS) take my kid? How will I pay my bills? And... Are you still my friend?" These fears would awaken whenever the alcohol wore off.

This man turned his life around. He woke up one night and felt deeply troubled about the disbelief he had toward his wife together with the haunting fear that maybe she had found someone else. It ate away at him along with resentment, jealousy, insecurity, guilt, sorrow and distance, which he was medicating through the drinking binges. This was no life. In his troubled heart he strongly felt that he needed to forgive her. He felt that God wanted this because he believed that he needed to forgive if he wanted to be forgiven. He woke his wife up in the middle of the night and told her, "I forgive you. No matter what you have or haven't done, I forgive you." And he meant it.

He determined to quit avoiding and chose to face the negative emotions he was feeling and to do something about the unmet needs they reflected. His anxiety levels diminished. He re-entered the 'land of the living' so to speak and became an inspiration to many people by getting up off the ground. His marriage stayed together and they were able to keep their family intact. He started to involve himself with others to give, not just get, and with this experienced meaning and joy. He became an encouragement to me. He would attribute the turn around to being forgiven and then passing it on. I would add that he was no longer living to avoid. He realized he was somebody who had something others needed and he discovered the joy of sharing it – he had hope and meaning!

When you are at the bottom, where do you start? You start from where you are and call out for help. Addicts need to hope again... to desire again... to feel again... to re-engage relationships again... to give again, to be genuinely valued (*loved*) again. But it's a journey. And the journey involves reconnecting, healing and restoration. Healing the body, healing the soul, and healing relationships.

If we start with the body... the body has been abused by the addiction and needs to recover. Healing the body starts with detoxing. Detoxing means cleaning out the chemicals and/or dependence on activities that operate as stressors to manipulate hormones and body states. The body needs these stimulants removed. This may involve very uncomfortable withdrawal side effects. But it has to be done. The body's neurochemistry and hormone system are out of balance and need 'rebalancing'. Physical detoxing could take a few days or longer depending on the severity of the dependency. The body may also be depleted of resources that it needs to be replenished of (*ie. minerals, enzymes, vitamins and nutritional values, antioxidants, etc.*) in order to rebuild itself and restore a healthy state. Don't underestimate this point! Supplementing is significant and will speed up biochemical recovery.

Secondly, 'psychological' detoxing is needed. When we have an addiction, the 'heart and soul' are involved - a heart that is either empty or hurting. And a soul that has learned to manage pain through avoidance. This pattern has to be broken. Separate yourself from the opportunity to indulge the addiction. If need be, lock yourself in a room for awhile, call a friend, give control of your money to your partner, get rid of the TV or internet, get into treatment, attend AA. Do whatever you need... get self-control back and cut off supply.

Sometimes, the hurt and pain being avoided is self-inflicted, and sometimes it stems from the failings or violation of others. Likely it will be a combination of both. Emptiness can be caused by relationship deficits or lack of meaning in one's life. Soul deficits must be addressed. Not just our body, but our soul & relationships also need healing. Soul healing involves restoration of hope, and restoration of hope involves restoration of relationships. They are a package deal. (Healing : topic for a future Communique)

If we describe the journey in short form... the addictive cravings and compulsive urges need to be contained and brought back to where they are under our control and not vice versa. So, to begin with... one has to quit feeding the body state-altering substances and/or experiences. Starve the cravings. No more tolerance for drugs, alcohol, porn, gambling, or whatever! Get control back. If you can't, get help to get control. Period! Plan your battle plan to win the war! Secondly... no more avoidance! No more neurotic living to avoid the emotions and feelings of unmet needs. Draw on the courage that comes from hope for more (*this is where God who is bigger than our circumstances comes in*). Rather than avoid negative and unwanted emotions - learn to discern the meaning of negative emotions and discipline yourself to become responsible about meeting those unmet needs in legitimate and relationally honoring ways. Learn how to address relationship deficits and find hope for an empty heart. Find someone who can help – who has walked ahead of you.

And finally become a factor for healing in not only your own life but those around you. God is the author of all good things and the harbinger of hope for all. There is hope. And it's available both for now and later. When hope is rediscovered we feel alive again. With hope restored we won't have to be consumed with ourselves. We will be able to give to others. Free to love & live again. Take heart and don't give up!