

3. **Release:** In terms of release and consequences – be aware, if we stop doing our addiction we may actually feel more suffering. We need to learn to stay at the cross of Jesus Christ and invite Him into the pain; to feel the pain with Him. The ultimate consequence is that instead of shame and fear and guilt, there is new life, peace and freedom.

The pathway to recovery

There are some key marks of a person's successful recovery. These are:

- The ability to accept one's limitations.
- A letting go of resentment and complaining.
- A surrendering of one's life to God.

Recovery groups such as AA use helpful short phrases:

- *Live and let live!*
- *Let go and let God.*
- *Easy does it!*
- *One day at a time.*

So, as an addict, when we feel ourselves slipping back into what is habitual for us, we should learn to stop at the moment of decision.

Spirituality

Passionate God

If addiction is caused by desire gone awry or desire bent towards the created rather than the Creator, then the solution is to enter into a passionate, emotional relationship with God in the Spirit and through Jesus.

Our heavenly Father loves us in a passionate sense – not just in our minds, but emotionally as well.

Another key issue is learning to take pleasure in God. Following spiritual disciplines can help here. They also help us to slow down and reflect on our lives.

*'Delight yourself in the LORD
and he will give you the desires
of your heart.'*

Psalm 37:4

A BRIEF INSIGHT INTO

ADDICTION

Understanding Addiction

Introduction

Western culture provides a vast array of choice in the supermarket of addictions and, significantly, our culture is not good at engaging with pain. The common response is to overwhelm the pain with medication, entertainment, drugs, sex, or any number of euphoric experiences. This provides an ideal basis for addictions to be established.

Addiction: a journey into slavery

The roots of addiction

The root of any addiction is a profound sense of *abandonment and deprivation*. This sense undermines the three fundamental needs of our humanity: *security, self-esteem and significance*. Addiction involves a turning away from relationship with God and others into a relationship with one's own physical and emotional experience. This empty space where there should be relationship is very difficult to tolerate, and the natural tendency is to fill this gap with 'something'; even if the 'something' that is used produces pain itself. This appears preferable to a painful emptiness, but the result is a tremendous *clutching or grasping anxiety*. However much we get, it's never enough.

The significance of the primary caregiver

People who manage their painful life experiences more effectively may have been securely attached to their primary caregivers (parents etc) because one function of the primary caregiver is to enable an infant to process their emotions. However, if the parent does not supply this kind of secure base on which the infant child may develop healthy ways of managing life's pains, the infant's stress levels may increase.

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At the other extreme, parents may be too intrusive, breaking the boundaries of their children. This happens in cases of sexual, emotional or physical abuse.

Without a safe relationship with our primary caregivers as an infant, we may not have felt safe or confident enough to face our painful feelings. As a result, feelings become something to fear, as they represent an unmanageable level of distress, anxiety or pain. This can lead to a two-way process that in turn provides fertile ground for the establishment of our addictions.

Unhealthy patterns that lead to addiction

First: A pattern of *avoidance* of anything that triggers anxiety is formed.

Second: We seek to manage our anxiety not with our own inner resources, but by leaning on external sources of comfort and management.

Unfortunately, as an addict, our avoidance often gets worse; our tolerance of stress gets less and less. We need to use our addiction of choice more and more just to manage. This is the effect sometimes described as developing 'tolerance'. Our repeated ways of behaving become patterns that our brain naturally and easily falls into.

So, as an addict, what is happening in our mind is that the part that feels emotion becomes disconnected from the part that more consciously processes it. We fail to consider what is occurring and focus only on our feelings. One of the consequences is that those in close relationship to us often feel as if they are cut off from us emotionally. Relationships are out of control, so they threaten us.

What is 'addiction'?

Addiction is a dependency on a mood-altering experience or substance. This dependency is to some degree physical as well as emotional. When in the grip of our addictive cycle, our addictive behaviour, thinking and feeling is solely focused on achieving our high. Addiction is a deeply solitary and individualistic process.

The slow decline into addiction

If we are an addict, we are not initially aware that we are becoming dependent on our substance or behaviour of choice. Addiction affects us in various ways. It affects us biologically, physiologically, psychologically and spiritually. At a deep level, our brain adjusts to whichever object gives comfort and reduces stress, and consequently:

1. The core experience of pain is not faced.
2. Stress can trigger our pain afresh.
3. We live increasingly inside the apparent safety that our false comfort offers.
4. We fear revealing our true self to anyone because we believe we are unlovable.
5. Our false self may seem self-sufficient and distant.
6. Our avoidance of pain and need for self-comfort distorts our relationship with ourselves. We forget who we are.

Our life becomes compartmentalised, with the shameful addiction being hidden. Intimacy with others becomes awkward, uncomfortable or threatening.

When we are in the grip of an addiction, our brain chemistry actually changes. Our brain gets used to these sorts of bursts of adrenalin and energy that happen in our addiction.

The spiritual view of addiction

Addiction is a soul-destroying slow death in which we lose touch with the reality of who we are, who God is and with the world around us. It's characterised by deception, shame and an escalating loss of control.

Those who seek to help us are unlikely to be successful without some insight into what creates our nightmare of addiction. It is not something that we can stop in our own strength. We feel powerless. We need a rescuer – a Saviour.

The addictive cycle

The addictive process, or cycle, is a recurring pattern that we are locked into. We need to identify what our cycle is: *How does it start? What do we do? What happens to us afterwards?*

The cycle

1. **Red flags:** These are the triggers that start the addiction cycle.
2. **Reflex:** This is when we begin to plot what we are going to do next, and start making a few choices.
3. **Ritual:** This encompasses the whole journey between the first impulse and the final destination, and because it's a ritual, it's something that is repeated over and over again.
4. **Release and consequence:** At some point there will be a kind of ecstatic release. There will be a moment of adrenalin rush and feeling good, but it's often followed by numbness, guilt, shame and an aching emptiness. This can trigger another cycle. We start beating ourselves up about it, playing the old yet powerful negative self-messages in our minds.

Recovery from addiction

Restoring relationships

The problems which lie at the heart of addictions are as a consequence of breakdown in relationships.

Healthy relating refers to three different domains: Relationship with God, relationship with the opposite sex, and relationship with others in our society. Recovery means our relationships in all these spheres become freer, less fearful and more loving. This process can be slow and take time.

Healthy habits

It is important to establish healthy habits in the exodus from slavery to recovery. These habits could be described as healthy repeating patterns of action.

Recovery must include the establishment of new habits that will reach the deep levels of our physical/emotional experience.

Reviewing the cycle

1. **Red flags:** Here it's all about self-awareness. The key thing is always to slow everything down, to breathe more deeply and not to just react on the spur of the moment. Become aware of our personal red flags. The 'HALT' acrostic is quite helpful, which is to ask: *Are you Hungry, Alone, Lonely or Tired?* These are often triggers – or red flags – for people.
2. **Ritual:** It's simply common sense – it's not going to those places where the addiction occurs. It's like the saying, 'If you don't want to get to the destination, don't get on the train!' It's just changing the ritual. People may find it very helpful to plan what are sometimes called 'escape strategies': *'What will I do to get out of that moment?'*