



Substance Abuse: The Disease of Addiction

Wayne Matthews, Ph.D.

Family Life Specialist

The word "addiction" often brings to mind a dark alley in a lower class neighborhood. Some picture a desperate young person shooting heroin into his veins. Others see a skid row bum, confused and staggering, barely able to stand, clutching a brown paper bag. Often, society views addicts or alcoholics as being poor, uneducated, socially-rejected street people with very little dignity, pride, or self-discipline. While this common view of addiction is not completely false, only a small percentage of addicted persons fit this description. In reality, addiction may be present in all types of individuals and families. Some of these families are rich and well-educated. Others are well-known members of the community, or popular personalities. Addiction is partial to no one. It is not merely a social problem. It is also a complex mix of environment, physical makeup, genes, feelings, and spiritual factors.

Traditionally, attempts to explain alcoholism or addiction placed the sole responsibility on the addicted person. Such a person was understood to have a "weak character" or "no will power." Other explanations put the responsibility on parents or family background. The addicted person was seen as having had a "bad example from parents," "poor raising," or as having come from a "low class of people."

If addiction is not a matter of poor character or low morals, then how does it start? Why do some people slip easily into addiction while others seem to have a resistance to it? Why does addiction occur generation after generation in some families and not at all in other families? Why is addiction and alcoholism common in some ethnic groups and rare in others? While these questions have never been easy to answer, a clearer understanding of addiction is definitely coming into focus.

Physical Makeup

Scientific studies over the past ten years indicate that some persons are more likely than others to become

addicted. Addiction is being viewed more and more by society not as a moral issue, but as a disease. It is a disease which results in behavior that upsets normal relations with a person's work, family, and society.

Until recently the word "disease" was avoided as it related to addiction. Scientists thought addiction could not be studied in medical laboratories and proven to qualify as a legitimate disease. Today, alcoholism and drug addiction *are* being examined in the laboratories, and some interesting results are being discovered. While the evidence is not certain, studies seem to support the concept of addiction as a disease. In fact, the American Medical Association has considered alcoholism a disease since 1956. Alcohol addiction meets all the qualifications of a disease. Addiction to other substances and behaviors does not seem to be so clear cut.

Recent studies of alcoholics and drug addicts, and their non-addicted children, indicate that basic physical causes of addiction *do* exist. Technical studies have shown that the basic physical makeup of the alcoholic is different from that of the non-alcoholic. One of the reasons alcoholism runs in families is because children can receive the disease from their parents through birth. This can happen just as easily as receiving eye or hair color from parents.

Other parts of the alcoholic's physical makeup are different from the non-alcoholic's. The alcoholic has a greater tolerance for alcohol because the liver processes it differently from the way the non-alcoholic's liver processes alcohol. Other aspects of the alcoholic's body chemistry indicate the person is born with the likelihood of developing the disease. Abnormal amounts of morphine-like compounds are often present in the body of a person inclined toward alcohol addiction. The brain wave patterns of non-alcoholic children of alcoholic parents are quite different from those of children of non-alcoholic parents. These are strong indicators that the disease of addiction may pass from parent to child.

Social Impacts

Being physically inclined toward an addiction such as alcoholism does not necessarily mean that a person

will become an addict. Many children of alcoholics do not become alcoholics themselves. Persons inclined toward addiction, however, are more likely to become addicted to some substance, behavior, or person.

Social influences have a definite impact upon a person's "drug of choice." For example, an addictive person may live in a family or community or attend a church where drinking is not acceptable. Because of these social pressures, such a person may never become an alcoholic. Rather, he or she may become hooked on other intense behaviors such as spending too much money or constantly eating. There may be a tendency to embrace socially acceptable behavior as the addictive outlet. Such a person may later become addicted to alcohol if drinking becomes acceptable in a different social setting.

Social influences of family, friends, and community contribute to addictive behaviors. This holds true whether a person is born inclined toward addiction or not. It is possible to become hooked without having the basic makeup of an addictive person. Liberal attitudes of society, media advertisements, and many movies promote intense and rash behaviors as normal. Often people see excessive drinking and drug use as a necessary part of the good life. Some consider eating large quantities of food to be healthy. Giving in to every appetite or desire is equal to "the good life," a part of the "American dream." Some of the more common behaviors which are accepted by society, and which may become addictive include:

- Drinking alcoholic beverages
- Taking drugs for fun
- Taking prescription drugs
- Smoking
- Drinking coffee and soft drinks
- Eating constantly
- Spending and credit-card shopping
- Gambling
- Watching television
- Sexual activities
- Viewing or reading obscene material
- Sleeping excessively

The list of possible addictive behaviors could also include what we would normally consider positive behavior. For example, we would see working long hours or exercising several hours every day as good. Even these type of activities, however, can interfere with normal living and happy relationships. Almost any behavior, activity, substance, or person used as a necessary means of coping with life can become addictive.

Psychological Makeup

Attempting to run away from life's problems is the result of fear. Fear of the unknown, fear of failure, fear of other people, and fear of danger are examples. Behaviors or substances which help people escape from their real life also help them to cover up some of their fears. They become more comfortable with life, at least for a while. Most types of escaping behaviors will quit working eventually, and the addicted person faces additional problems and fears. Such a person may address these fears in one of several ways. The choices include:

- Continue addictive behavior until physical or mental breakdown occurs
- Engage in behavior which will eventually result in being jailed.
- Continue addictive behavior, resulting in death.
- Seek professional help and the assistance of support groups.

Persons who have the disease of addiction come from various backgrounds and different family systems. There is not any *one type* of person who represents all addicts. Addicted individuals, however, seem to share one or more personality characteristics in common. Emotions are not working properly, and feelings are not expressed. These are the things that make such people mentally inclined to addiction. Most addicted persons, or persons inclined to addiction, experience one or more of the following:

- Feelings of being incomplete
- Desire to rescue people from trouble
- Tendency to try making people happy
- Low self-worth
- Self-centered
- Desire to be perfect
- Difficulty in allowing themselves to be human
- Feelings of guilt and shame
- Unexpressed feelings
- Anger
- Defensiveness
- Excessive worry
- Procrastination
- Desire to control people and events
- Blaming others for their problems
- Lack of trust
- Feeling extremely responsible or not responsible at all
- Depression
- Difficulty in feeling close to people
- Feeling like a victim

The above is not a complete listing. Like other people, addicted people do, feel, and think many things. There is not a certain number of characteristics which determines whether a person is an addict or a potential addict. This is simply a picture of thousands of alcoholics, drug addicts, and those hooked on other substances and behaviors.

Help Is Available

Many people caught up in addiction feel a sense of shame, guilt, frustration, and no hope. They often feel that they must be defective in some way. They frequently want to find a way out of their addiction, but they do not know which way to turn.

If you, or someone you know, are having trouble with compulsive behavior of any kind, there is help available. If you realize and can admit that you have a problem, you are well on your way to recovery. According to the nature of your situation, any one of a number of individuals and organizations will be glad to help you:

- Medical doctors
- Ministers, rabbis, or priests
- Counselors or therapists
- Chemical dependency treatment centers
- Alcoholics Anonymous
- Narcotics Anonymous
- Overeaters Anonymous
- Gamblers Anonymous
- Sexaholics Anonymous
- Codependents Anonymous
- Emotions Anonymous
- Adult Children of Alcoholics
- Al-anon or Al-ateen (for members of alcoholic's family)
- Nar-anon (for members of drug addict's family)

There are reasons why you may be addicted; it is a disease. The good news is there are some solutions to the hurtful cycle of addictions. You do not have to stay where you are. Life CAN change for the better! You have choices. Do yourself a big favor — call for help if you need it.

Reference List

- Beattie, Melody. *Codependent No More*. New York: Harper and Row, 1987.
- Lewis, R.A. "The Family and Addictions: An Introduction." *Family Relations*, 38(3) 1989, 254-257.
- Marlin, J. and Schloat, A. "The Addictive Personality: Who Uses Drugs and Why?" (filmstrip). Pleasantville, NY: Human Relations Media, Inc., 1979.
- Petrakis, Peter L. *Alcoholism: An Inherited Disease*. Washington, D.C.: National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, U.S. Government Printing Office, DHHS Publication No. ADM 85-1426, 1985.

Suggested Readings

- Beattie, M. *Codependent No More*. New York: Harper and Row, 1987.
- Beattie, M. *Beyond Codependency*. San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1989.
- Black, C. *It Will Never Happen to Me!* Denver: M.A.C. Publishing, 1981.
- Kendall, J.E. *Seeking Normal: The Adult Child of an Alcoholic - A Clinical Overview*. Published by author, 1987.
- Seixas, J. and Youcha, G. *Children of Alcoholism: A Survivor's Manual*. New York: Crown Publishers, 1985.
- Woititz, J.G. *Adult Children of Alcoholics*. Pompano Beach, FL: Health Communications, Inc., 1983.

The Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service *Bringing the University to You!*

The Cooperative Extension Service is the largest, most successful informal educational organization in the world. It is a nationwide system funded and guided by a partnership of federal, state and local governments that delivers information to help people help themselves through the land-grant university system.

Extension carries out programs in the broad categories of agriculture, natural resources and environment; home economics; 4-H and other youth; and community resource development. Extension staff members live and work among the people they serve to help stimulate and educate Americans to plan ahead and cope with their problems.

Some characteristics of the Cooperative Extension system are:

- The federal, state and local governments cooperatively share in its financial support and program direction.
- It is administered by the land-grant university as designated by the state legislature through an Extension director.
- Extension programs are nonpolitical, objective and based on factual information.
- It provides practical, problem-oriented education for people of all ages. It is designated to take the knowledge of the university to those persons who do not or cannot participate in the formal classroom instruction of the university.
- It utilizes research from university, government and other sources to help people make their own decisions.
- More than a million volunteers help multiply the impact of the Extension professional staff.
- It dispenses no funds to the public.
- It is not a regulatory agency, but it does inform people of regulations and of their options in meeting them.
- Local programs are developed and carried out in full recognition of national problems and goals.
- The Extension staff educates people through personal contacts, meetings, demonstrations and the mass media.
- Extension has the built-in flexibility to adjust its programs and subject matter to meet new needs. Activities shift from year to year as citizen groups and Extension workers close to the problems advise changes.