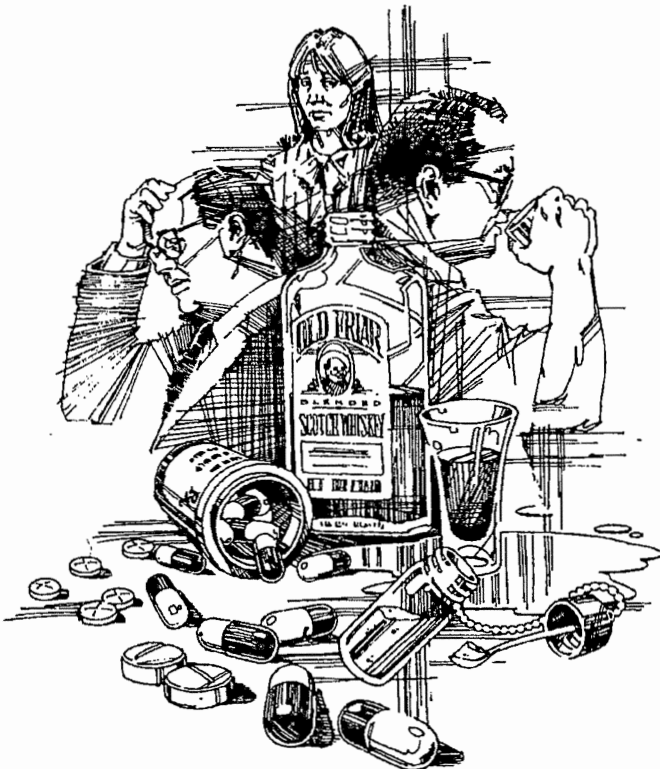




Substance Abuse: The Addictive Personality

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Americans 14 years of age or older drink an average of two-and-a-half gallons of spirits annually. In addition, we consume two-and-a-half gallons of wine and 30 gallons of beer every year. Over 18 million people in our country engage in problem drinking. About one out of every 15 people who drinks will become an alcoholic. There are about 190,000 adult alcoholics and 17,000 teenage alcoholics in Oklahoma. There are about one million heroin addicts in our country. Somewhere between four million and ten million Americans are compulsive gamblers. Prescription drugs hook tens of thousands each year. Cigarette smoking is still very popular among millions of people. Uncontrolled overeating runs

wild in a nation where being overweight is our number one health problem.

Why do so many of us become dependent or addicted to a wide variety of substances and behaviors? There is probably no single right answer to that question. It is becoming obvious, however, that the keys to addiction involve much more than driven behavior. There are indeed problems behind the causes of addiction. Stanton Peele suggests in his book entitled *Love and Addiction*, "If we want to come to terms with addiction, we have to stop blaming drugs alone and start looking at people, at ourselves, and learn what makes us dependent."

Some people who have studied addiction say heredity is the primary cause. They say we get the disease from our parents or grandparents. Others believe our environment produces addictive behaviors. Still others think our personality (our mental, emotional, and physical makeup) is the basis of addiction. There is a good chance that all three of these factors play a part in forming habits which are addictive.

Heredity

Let's consider heredity first. Research has shown that alcoholism, for example, runs in families. Children of alcoholic parents are four times more likely than other children to become alcoholics. One series of studies has shown this holds true even if the children were adopted at birth by non-alcoholic parents. In fact, any person who is a blood relative of an alcoholic has a greater chance of developing the disease. We know that people can inherit the possibility of developing diabetes, heart disease, or kidney problems. There is also a chance that the possibility of some kind of addiction is present at birth.

Environment

Our environment influences all kinds of behavior development as we grow up, and even after we are grown. For the first several years of our lives, our parents serve as key role models in our becoming who we are today. Their words, behaviors, attitudes, and emotional expressions all become a part of us. As small children, addictive behaviors may be learned from our parents or from other

family members. That behavior may be drinking, taking drugs, watching too much television, or constantly eating.

As children growing up, we not only learn from observing our parents, but we also learn by interacting with them. If our parents are too protective, we probably do not develop the confidence or ability to deal with problems of life. We become dependent on our parents or others to solve problems for us. Some persons depend too heavily on the strength and knowledge of other people. These are the ones most likely to depend heavily on drugs or addictive habits.

In addition to the things we learn growing up, we now live in a society which encourages addictive behavior. Our culture has an "eat, drink, and be merry" attitude. Department stores encourage credit card spending. Family and job stress justifies daily "happy hours." All-you-can-eat restaurants attract huge crowds. Our fear of boredom drives us to a constant need for entertainment. Advertising encourages us to buy, buy, buy! And we do. Because we think all these things will make us happy and secure, we often use them to excess.

Another thing our society has taught us is the "quick fix." Modern appliances have reduced some of our chores to a fraction of what they used to be. We have instant coffee, instant soup, toaster waffles, and microwave meals. If we have an ache or pain, we want our doctor to give us some medicine to fix it. We want quick relief. Then we turn on the television and see some of life's biggest problems solved within an hour or two. We come to expect that our problems can be resolved just as easily. When they are not we become frustrated and stressed, setting the stage for addictive behaviors.

No doubt about it — pressures in today's world can seem too much for us at times. For some of us, there is the tendency to want to ESCAPE life's problems rather than meet them head-on. We can escape by drinking too much or by taking drugs. Some of us escape by watching hours and hours of television. Still others escape by working too much, or by exercising too much, or by spending too much money on things we do not need. We can misuse almost any behavior or activity when we do it as a means to run away from life.

Personality

Both heredity and our environment help form our personality, or who we are. Many mental health professionals, including drug and alcohol abuse counselors, believe certain learned characteristics are present in almost

all addictive personalities. These characteristics include:

- Low frustration tolerance
- Low self-image
- Fear
- Boredom
- Helplessness
- Dependency on others

Frustration tolerance refers to the amount of stress we can handle before feeling anxious, angry, or uncomfortable. Studies have shown that people vary greatly in their ability to withstand stress and frustration. For those who do not tolerate frustration well, the desire to escape is tempting. Drugs or alcohol may provide the escape hatch some are seeking. Over time, facing frustration straight-on becomes even more difficult. The escape hatch becomes a matter of habit which can get out of control.

A person who has constant feelings of low self-worth may try to cure those feelings through addictive behaviors. Drugs and alcohol often produce false confidence which seems like wonderful magic to the one who feels imperfect. These mood-altering chemicals give the user the impression of being stronger, more attractive, extremely talented, or highly intelligent. It is fairly easy to get caught in the trap of turning to this artificial means of feeling good about oneself.

Various drugs can also produce a false sense of security for those who have a lot of fear. Fear related to embarrassment, loneliness, the future, conflict with others, or life in general can be very painful. Drugs or other escape behaviors seem to relieve fear, and may become a daily habit.

Constant boredom can also set the stage for addiction. When our real world seems dull, routine, or pointless, we can alter reality with drugs or alcohol. Under the influence of these chemicals, our world may seem very exciting and fresh. This desperate wish to escape boredom probably accounts for much of the drug abuse among young people.

A strong emotional need to escape often occurs when we have feelings of being weak. If we feel weak, or if we have a sense of personal failure, dissatisfaction and frustration set in. We may quickly latch on to the imagined strength and power given us by alcohol or drugs. Over time, we can become dependent on these substances.

Finally, emotional dependency helps to shape just about every addictive personality. Dependency in this sense means a tendency to seek help from outside oneself rather than from one's own strength and intelligence. Again, those who depend most heavily on others are also



those most likely to depend heavily on drugs or addictive habits.

Concluding Remarks

This is only a brief overview of addictive behaviors and addictive personalities. For further information, check with your public library, book stores, doctor, mental health clinics, or school counselors.

If you, or someone you know, has addictive behavior problems, help is available. Admitting there is a problem is the first step necessary to recovery. One or more of the following will be glad to assist you:

- Medical doctors
- Religious leaders
- Counselors
- Mental Health Professionals
- Chemical dependency treatment centers
- Alcoholics Anonymous
- Narcotics Anonymous
- Overeaters Anonymous
- Gamblers Anonymous
- Al-anon or Al-ateen (for members of alcoholic's family)

Get the help you need when you need it, because YOU deserve the best that life has to offer.

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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.