

SOME PERSONAL REFLECTIONS ON ADDICTION

I understand if you want to know where I'm coming from on this topic, so I'll say some things here which you might not hear from most counselors, since they usually (like most people) don't have strong spiritual interests and usually don't try to understand things philosophically.

DISEASE THEORY

Many workers in the field would say that this theory has worn out its usefulness—too many subtle factors make it vary from case to case. But IN SOME CASES, it remains fundamentally true. Some people do have genetically based neurological and anatomical differences which predispose them to addiction—about one out of ten people are like this to some degree. These are facts! Therefore, addiction is not so much a disease, as it is a *potential disability* for some of us. I do not think this applies to all people who develop addictions, however.

BENEFITS?

You may decide that the problems and pains of life just aren't worth the effort it would require, for you to live a more normal life. There certainly seem to be benefits, depending on the substance: courage and confidence, greater creativity, more energy, sexual prowess, a more profound "spiritual" state, exercising individual freedom, etcetera. However, other people do want to live a normal life, and they are negatively impacted by the severity of your habit, just like your body and mind is. Eventually, you realize that you're being extraordinarily selfish!

SPIRITUAL EFFECT:

I believe we are all spiritual seekers on some level, and that addicts are merely looking in the wrong place. The bliss or euphoria the drug user feels does come, at least partially, from higher reality. But that higher reality is being distorted—the addict is temporarily "warping" or otherwise artificially changing his/her central nervous system by supplying it with certain chemicals, so that it can receive that energy. However, the freight must be paid: not only is your nervous system being strained in an unnatural way, but you're getting accustomed to a false experience of God. After a while, either your system can no longer take it, or you realize you've been operating under delusion.

TYPES OF ADDICTS

The greatest range of specific types of addicts I think is found among alcoholics. To a lesser degree the categories below may apply to folks who get involved with other substances or behaviors.

I think the *binge addict* is a valid category. These folks seem not to have strong cravings. They can go for days without drinking, but once they start, they can't stop until they're unconscious (therefore often getting into trouble).

Otherwise, addiction professionals recognize Type A alcoholics as individuals who develop their problem when they're older. They drink more steadily to keep some alcohol in their systems and tend not to get badly drunk or go on binges. *Functional addicts* fall in this category—individuals who maintain stable, even productive lives, at least on the surface. Most *physiological addicts* are also in this category. These users are more honest and seem not engage in the “stinking thinking” usually attributed to substance abusers. (For that reason, some would say that physiological addicts are not true alcoholics.) These relatively rare drinkers are almost always older people.

Type B addicts start when they're younger and get drunk and go on binges more frequently. The more general term *desperate addicts* might be applied to them.

The type of addict you are often influences how much a strong recovery means to you. Although it usually involves significant levels of unhappiness and a desire to change for the better, in some cases, I think that addiction can coexist with high levels of ethical maturity or spiritual fulfillment.

CRITERIA AND TREATMENT

At what point you cross the line between abuse and addiction, is up to you. Can you go for a week without using and still feel fine? Have there been lots of negative or difficult things happening in your life recently, even if you don't think your substance use is involved? If you cannot tell, a professional addictions counselor can evaluate you.

Most everyone knows that preventative treatments are more effective than punitive ones. Although I don't think that any one treatment strategy can help *all* addicts, I do think that some standard treatment strategies help well over 95% of them. If you think you can manage a strong recovery while still hanging out with your old friends and not attending support groups... well, I am at open to that idea! I'll believe it when I see it. The contemplative methods I teach will probably not help much if you ignore the common-sense social factors.

CORE BELIEFS

The spiritual or philosophical element is very important in most people's recovery. Why do we exist? What are people for? For some drug users, “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” seems to involve a concerted effort at self-destruction, quickly or slowly. Evidently, they want to cover up, squash, or smother something inside themselves that they absolutely hate.

At some point—AS MOST NONADDICTS ALSO DO—they picked up the idea that they are bad, worthless, hopeless sinners. This is frequently reinforced by the cards some of us are dealt at birth. If my circumstances are, or were, so horrible, did God ever intend me to be happy without drugs? What's the point of life?

Again, this gets into the profound issue mentioned above. What are human beings for? We are all confronted with a vast, frightening universe. Many influential minds—Sigmund Freud, Karl Marx, Jean-Paul Sartre—have reinforced the idea that we are these tiny little nothings at the whims and mercy of fate. I don't believe that. No... enlightenment DOES exist, and in fact is being found by more and more people with addiction issues.

So... wrestle with your attitude, as necessary! Even nonaddicted substance users should reflect on the fact that they DON'T LIKE THEMSELVES as they usually are in their normal, sober condition. If they did, after all, they would feel happy enough all the time to never use anything, except maybe purely for fun.

ARE YOU CHILDISH?

Another thing deserving some commentary is the time-tested wisdom among many counselors to treat adult drug addicts—most of the time—as if they are children. “They are children in adult bodies,” one supervisor told me. Understandably, this bothers many people who are in programs which require them to see counselors. By and large, however, there is often much truth to this statement, and there's a kind of philosophical way of looking at it which may help.

We normally think of “growing up” as involving accepting reality and adapting ourselves to it. We accept that we need to learn manners, get good grades, obey traffic laws, conduct ourselves properly at work, etc. All that depends, however, on accurate perception of reality. But drug addiction involves the opposite: you adapt reality to *yourself*, by intentionally distorting your perception of it. By using substances, you change your body/mind in such a way that your perception of reality is kept the way that you like it, instead of changing as you move on in life.

This is what is behind one of those unwritten axioms in the field: that the addict stays at the level of emotional and moral maturity that he or she was at when they started using. In terms of growing up, you pick up where you left off when you stop using.

Addiction offers a great gift to its sufferers: LOTS of light at the end of the tunnel if you really go the distance in recovery. You'll recognize that you've learned many spiritual lessons which most nonaddicted people around you are still struggling with.

THE TWELVE STEPS

This was a “Divine download” from Bill Wilson back in 1935. I call it that because, with appropriate modification, it can apply to any situation in life which may be challenging or difficult. Like any important work of genius, it seems obvious in retrospect. For me, the most profound philosophical aspect of these steps is reflected in one of their traditions: that they would be forever *nonprofessional*. The meetings, in other words, are *run by God*, with all human agendas officially excluded.