

What's YOUR Addiction?

by Linda Fiverson

When we think of addictions the first ones that come to mind are usually alcohol, smoking, drugs, eating and gambling. There are many others that fall into this category too; shopping, hoarding, collecting and cleaning are just a few... We can actually become “addicted” to almost anything.

We obsess before we act and yearn for that time when we can “take a break” from reality. The feeling is so strong that we somehow cannot control the thought until we finally give in to it. Of course, our excessive behavior is what turns some of these obsessive thoughts into troublesome situations both, for ourselves and others.

This can be hard for any of us but teenagers who drink or take drugs can have an even tougher time. There's often peer pressure to do these things because everyone else is doing them and saying how great they are. Even the kid with the best ethics can break down under this pressure. Teenage drinking has gotten so out of control that kids sneak it into school in their water bottles! This leads to many problems including reckless behavior such as drinking and driving. The more they get away with it, the more they do it... But are they getting away with it? At what point does this excessive “Party Behavior” become a problem that has to be addressed as an addiction? No one wants to admit there is a problem – not even family members.

No matter what our obsession is, it controls our mind and causes us to become preoccupied with it. Regardless of how hard we want to get rid of it, we are haunted by thoughts and feelings about it. When these obsessions turn into compulsive behavior, as they do, there is a high risk for them to become addictions.

Obsessions usually start off innocently as thoughts. Perhaps it's a memory of something that made us feel good, helped us deal with stress or one of life's issues. Then we want to do it more often and begin to think about it more often too. Soon it begins to consume our thoughts and rule our lives. After a lot of conversations with ourselves, the only way to stop these thoughts is to turn them into actions. NOW, not only do we have obsessions, we have behaviors that partner with them. That's what compulsions are; irresistible impulses to act on obsessions. They're behaviors intended to reduce our anxieties but their side effects cause us to deteriorate instead. As a result, we continue to repeat this destructive behavior until it consumes our days and nights.

So you see, the cycle of addiction feeds itself and self perpetuates. As small thoughts and ideas become intrusive and more frequent, they tend to go on to become obsessive and then, compulsive. There are many degrees to which one might be obsessive or compulsive but when it becomes habitual and spirals out of control, it's a real and very serious concern.

Surprisingly or maybe not surprisingly, we can be the last one to accept that we have a “problem”. It's something we all try to hide and we usually deny it with great indignation when confronted. Most times, addicts don't – and won't – even admit it to themselves. We feel like we are the only ones who have this problem so we don't reach out because we are embarrassed and ashamed.

Addictions don't discriminate. Anyone at any time may find they have one. What are the telltale signs? Here are some questions to consider:

- Is there something you do that you can't control once you start even though you know it's not good for you?
- Is there something you can't stop thinking about?
- Does it interfere and take time away from doing other things and spending time with friends?
- Is it something you do in private and deny you've done?
- Are you sneaking around? (Part of the sneak is sometimes trying to deceive the person you don't want to get stopped or caught by.) Trying to get away with this makes us feel smarter.

- Do you constantly feel guilty, remorseful or ashamed?
- Do you get angry at yourself, or rather the “other person” who lives inside you – the one who talks to you convincingly saying, “It’s okay to indulge”, “This will be the last time”, “I’m going to start tomorrow”? (Now you feel your two minds negotiating...)
- Who is going to be the boss? We have to recognize that we have a Pilot and a Co-Pilot.

Addiction can be psychological, physical or a combination of the two. When it’s psychological the person’s dependence is prompted by desire and emotional and mental cravings. There are thoughts, feelings and ideas at the forefront. When it’s physical, it’s motivated by the body’s dependence and “need” for the trigger. There’s a chemical reaction and implications for abuse. As the body builds up tolerance levels, higher and larger amounts of the perilous substance are needed to get the same effects.

People with addictions usually rely on their addictive behaviors to forget about problems or issues they’re struggling with by going into their “mindless zone”. They exhibit frequent and repeated behavior and mood changes and often lose all previous interests. It’s amazing how our brain is smart and multifunctional yet it can be manipulated by an addiction to focus on just one thing.

So, what can “the addict” do? People with addictions are often afraid or reluctant to open up and trust someone with their “secret.” When we’re the one reaching out to help we may feel just as scared and worried to approach the topic. It’s normal to feel like this and it’s okay to express those thoughts too. When we’re honest and talk about our emotions and feelings it may give others with the same problem an opportunity to express theirs. It’s always comforting to know that “we are not alone.”

It seems so hard to “pull in the anchor” when we feel like we’ve gone too far from the shore. It’s not easy to wish away the hovering thoughts, relinquish the obsessions or abolish the intrusive urges and compulsions. Remember, thoughts are powerful, but they are not reality!

A good way to start is by getting rid of the product that that tempts us. We can do that if it’s something we have in our house. For example, if alcohol is the problem, we can’t stop drinking if we have a fully stocked bar of liquor. Abstaining gives us back control and puts us in the “driver’s seat.” Sometimes we need to change our social settings too. Try going to places that don’t serve alcohol. Why hang out with people that drink a lot? It’s easier not to have the distraction and temptation than to ignore it when it’s there.

Compulsive overeating has nothing to do with hunger. We rely a lot on our senses; we see and smell food and build up a well of anticipation just thinking about how good it looks and will taste! Even seeing what time of day it is makes us hungry. The brain doesn’t know why we’re eating or that eating feels calming, mindless and free and the stomach doesn’t realize that it’s full until there is nothing left on the plate...

All addictions have the same behavior patterns. We justify, negotiate, make excuses and have the same inner conversations planning the sneaking and hiding. We feel shame and guilt. The only difference is that some addictions are socially acceptable and some are not and some are illegal.

A lot depends on where we are in the cycle of addiction and how enslaved we are by it. Acceptance and willingness to make changes are the hardest part but it’s only when we get to this point that we will be able to begin to free ourselves from the web of addiction...