

**The Addictive Personality
Understanding the Addictive Process and Compulsive Behavior**

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foreword by Damian McElrath, Ph.D.

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Part 1

Addiction as a Process

Over the years, addiction has been described in many different ways—a moral weakness, a lack of willpower, an inability to face the world, a physical sickness, and a spiritual illness. If you are a family member or a friend of a practicing addict, you may have more colorful ways of describing addiction. However, addiction can be more accurately described and defined in the following way:

Nearly all human beings have a deep desire to feel happy and to find peace of mind and soul. At times in our lives, most of us find this wholeness of peace and beauty, but then it slips away, only to return at another time. When it leaves us, we feel sadness and even a slight sense of mourning. This is one of the natural cycles of life, and it's not a cycle we can control.

To some extent, we can help these cycles along, but for the most part they're uncontrollable—all of us must go through them. We can either accept these cycles and learn from them or fight them, searching instead for elusive happiness.

Addiction can be viewed as an attempt to control these uncontrollable cycles. When addicts use a particular object, such as a substance or an event to produce a desired mood change, they believe they can control these cycles, and at first they can. Addiction, on its most basic level, is an attempt to control and fulfill this desire for happiness.

Addiction must be viewed as a process that is progressive. Addiction must be seen as an illness that undergoes continuous development from a definite, though often unclear, beginning toward an end point.

We can draw a strong comparison between addiction and cancer. For us to understand all the different forms of cancer, we must first understand what they all have in common. All cancers share a similar process: the uncontrolled multiplying of cells. Similarly, we must first understand what all addictions and addictive processes have in common: the out-of-control and aimless searching for wholeness, happiness, and peace through a relationship with an object or event. No matter what the addiction is, every addict engages in a relationship with an object or event in order to produce a desired mood change, state of intoxication, or trance state.

- The alcoholic experiences a mood change while drinking at the neighborhood bar.
- The food addict experiences a mood change by bingeing or starving.
- The addictive gambler experiences a mood change by placing bets on football games and then watching the action on television.
- The shoplifter experiences a mood change when stealing clothing from a department store.
- The sex addict experiences a mood change while browsing in a pornographic bookstore.
- The addictive spender experiences a mood change by going on a shopping spree.
- The workaholic experiences a mood change by staying at work to accomplish another task even though he or she is needed at home.

Although all of the objects or events described are vastly different, they all produce desired mood changes in the addicts who engage in them.

Types of Highs

Addicts are attracted to certain types of mood changes or highs. Harvey Milkman and Stanley Sunderwirth, in *Craving for Ecstasy: The Consciousness & Chemistry of Escape*, speak of different but specific addictive highs to which people are attracted: arousal, satiation, and fantasy. Arousal and satiation are the most common, followed by fantasy, which is part of all addictions.

Both arousal and satiation are attractive, cunning, baffling, and powerful highs. Arousal comes from amphetamines, cocaine, ecstasy, and the first few drinks of alcohol, and from the behaviors of gambling, sexual acting out, spending, stealing, and so on. Arousal causes sensations of intense, raw, unchecked power and gives feelings of being untouchable and all-powerful. It speaks directly to the drive for power. (This is described more fully in the recovery section, starting on page 65.) Arousal makes addicts believe they can achieve happiness, safety, and fulfillment. Arousal gives the addict the feeling of omnipotence while it subtly drains away all power. To get more power, addicts return to the object or event that provides the arousal and eventually become dependent on it. Arousal addicts become swamped by fear: they fear their loss of power and they fear others will discover how powerless they truly are.

Unlike the power trip of an arousal high, a satiation high gives the addict a feeling of being full, complete, and beyond pain. (Arousal gives the addict the feeling that the pain can be defeated.) Heroin, alcohol, marijuana, Valium, and various behaviors such as overeating, watching TV, or playing slot machines all produce satiation highs.

The satiation high is attractive to certain types of addicts because it numbs the sensations of pain or distress. This pain-free state lasts as long as the individual remains in the mood change created by the addictive ritual. But this type of high attaches the unknowing addict to the grief process. The trance always fades away and sensations always disappear, leaving the addict with the original pain plus the loss of the pleasurable sensations. Over time, satiation addicts are forced to act out more often (if they're behavioral addicts) or increase their dosages (if they're substance abusers). The satiation high gains control over the person, always promising relief from pain. Ultimately, however, the pain returns, deeper and more persistent, until it turns into grief and despair.

Trance

It is helpful to view intoxication—the mood change of the addictive ritual—as a trance state, especially when examining behavioral addictions such as gambling, spending, and sexual acting out.

The trance state is a state of detachment, a state of separation from one's physical surroundings. In the trance, one can live in two worlds simultaneously, floating back and forth between the addictive world and the real world, often without others suspecting it.

The trance allows addicts to detach from the pain, guilt, and shame they feel, making it extremely attractive. The addict becomes increasingly skillful at living in the trance and using it to cover painful feelings. In the process, he or she gets a sense of power and control, but also becomes dependent on the trance, which is part of the progression of the addictive process.

The addict views the trance state as a solution to a problem. “Gambling allowed me to be with people without really being with them,” said one compulsive gambler, whose acting out became uncontrollable after her husband died. The trance salved her grief and sorrow. It filled up her emptiness. She felt no pain as long as she was in the casino. Addiction and the trance offered her a solution, and she used it as long as her savings and insurance monies held out. Then she was forced to confront the reality of her losses, and the blow was even more devastating. Not only had she lost her husband but also the money they had put aside to support her. Addiction takes and takes, and then takes some more.

Our attraction to trance-like sensations grows out of our natural desire for transcendence to contact and live within spiritual principles. It is our desire to reconnect with the divine. The sensations of the trance produce a feeling in the individual that connection has taken place. It creates a virtual reality in which the spiritual experience seems real, but is in fact only illusionary. True spiritual experiences give us increased meaning and the skills to connect with meaning again, with healing and compassion. They give us a stronger belief in relationships and humanity. After experiencing the quasi-spiritual experience of the addictive trance, people are left with the pain and anxiety they were trying to escape, in addition to the emptiness created when the soul realizes that no true connection has taken place.

Thus, the trance state is a part of the definition of addiction as a spiritual illness. Addiction is an illness in which people believe in and seek spiritual connection through objects and behaviors that can only produce temporary sensations. These repeated, vain attempts to connect with the Divine produce hopelessness, fear, and grieving that further alienate the addict from spirituality and humanity.

Extending the Addiction Field

Addiction has been viewed in a very limited way, mainly because the treatment of addiction is a relatively young field. Addiction treatment on any sizable scale began with Alcoholics Anonymous in 1935, which concerned itself with alcoholism, a specific form of addiction. In addition, while most fields of study start with a general knowledge of a subject that gradually becomes more specific, our knowledge about addiction started with a specific form of addiction that gradually has been broadened to help people with many types of addiction. Moreover, the addiction treatment field was not started by a group of professionals, but by people who suffered from one specific form of addiction. As more about the nature of addiction was learned from these pioneers, it was found that their principles of recovery could also help people with other addictions. Thus came the start of Gamblers Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous, Overeaters Anonymous, Sex Addicts Anonymous, Shoplifters Anonymous, Spenders Anonymous, and other Twelve Step self-help groups.

Why do certain principles of recovery work so effectively for all of these different groups? The apparent reason is that the same illness, addiction, is being treated. We are starting to see that there are many forms of addiction; though they are different, they have core similarities. In the following pages, we will examine these similarities.

Acting Out

Acting out—a term that will be used frequently throughout this book—takes place when an addict engages in addictive behaviors or addictive mental obsessions. Here are some examples:

- Sex addicts cruising sections of town where they are most likely to find prostitutes.
- Compulsive gamblers studying racing forms.
- Compulsive eaters going to different stores to buy food, fearing clerks will recognize and think badly of them.
- Addictive spenders making purchases.

For the addict, acting out is a way to create certain feelings that cause the emotional and mental shift that the addict desires. By acting out, either through thoughts or behavior, the addict learns to create feelings of being relaxed, excited, or in control. The addict can also create feelings of fear, self-disgust, shame, and self-hate. Most of all, the addict achieves an illusion of being in control through acting out.

Addiction becomes an attempt to make emotional sense out of life. Addicts believe on an emotional level that they are being fulfilled. The trance created by the acting out is often described by addicts as a time in which they feel alive and complete. This is especially true in the earlier stages of the addiction process.

Nurturing through Avoidance

Addiction and the mood change created by acting out is a very seductive process in which the addict is emotionally seduced into believing that he or she can be nurtured by objects or events.

We can get temporary relief from objects and events, but we can't get real nurturing from them. All of us have issues, pains, frustrations, and memories we would rather not have to face. At times, we have all used objects or events to avoid facing these. Addiction, however, becomes a lifestyle in which the person loses control of the use of objects and events and gets locked into an emotional evading of life. Addicts keep delaying life issues as a way of nurturing themselves.

All of us have the potential to form addictive relationships with a number of different objects or events, especially during stressful times when we would welcome a promise of relief and comfort. However, avoiding reality and responsibility by the addictive use of objects and events is an ineffective way of self-nurturing. The mood change created by acting out creates only an illusion of being nurtured. For example, the food addict binges after a fight with his partner and finds the illusion of peace. For the moment, he feels full both physically and emotionally instead of empty. During such moments, there is an intense sense of comfort. In a similar way, the compulsive gambler gets lost in the action and feels excited, confident, and sure of herself. This time she knows she has picked a winner.

Slowly, addicts start to depend on the addictive process for a sense of nurturing and definition of who they are. Their lives become the pursuit of their addiction.

Emotional Logic

Addiction starts out as an emotional illusion that is entrenched in the addict before others around the addict or even the addict himself realizes that an addictive relationship has been formed. The addict starts to build a defense system to protect the addictive belief system against attacks from others, but only after the addiction is well established on an emotional level. On a thinking, intellectual level, the addict knows that an object cannot bring emotional fulfillment. Alcoholics have heard the old saying “You can’t escape into a bottle.” Workaholics know “there’s more to life than just work.” Addictive spenders understand “money can’t buy happiness.”

The illness of addiction begins very deep within a person, and his or her suffering takes place on an emotional level. Intimacy, positive or negative, is an emotional experience that is not logically evaluated. Addiction is an emotional relationship with an object or event, through which addicts try to meet their needs for intimacy. When looked at in this way, the logic of addiction starts to become clear. When compulsive eaters feel sad, they eat to feel better. When alcoholics start to feel out of control with anger, they have a couple of drinks to get back in control.

Addiction is very logical and follows a logical progression, but this progression is totally based on what I call *emotional logic*, not intellectual logic. A person who tries to understand addiction using intellectual logic will become frustrated and feel manipulated by the addict. This is partly why talk therapy (talking one-on-one with only a counselor and without a support group) is so ineffective in convincing addicts to end their destructive, addictive relationships.

We can sum up emotional logic in the phrase “I want what I want and I want it now.” Emotional needs often feel very urgent and compulsive. Emotional logic works to satisfy this urgency even if it is not in the best interest of the person.

For example, a compulsive gambler tells himself he is done gambling for the week. Shortly, however, he has a rough day at work and feels uneasy, so he looks over his racing form to try to ease his feelings, still telling himself he won’t gamble anymore this week. While reviewing the racing form, he starts to hear his emotional logic telling him he has found a sure bet. “Why didn’t I see this before?” he says. “It’d be crazy for me to miss this opportunity!” Thus, he becomes pitted against himself—one side believing in his “sure thing,” the other reminding him of his promise not to gamble for the rest of the week. Inside, the emotional pressure builds. Because addiction involves the deep need to have emotional needs met and emotional pressures relieved, he finally must give in to his urge, especially after he has convinced himself he would be stupid not to grab this opportunity.

Emotional logic pits the addict against himself or herself. In the book *Alcoholics Anonymous*, there is a sentence that reads, “Remember that we deal with alcohol—cunning, baffling, powerful!” This is also one of the most truthful ways to describe the emotional logic found in all addictions: cunning, baffling, powerful.

Addiction Is More Than a Relationship of Convenience

Often, our relationships with objects or events are “relationships of convenience,” meaning we manipulate objects for our own convenience to make our lives easier and more comfortable. Most people have relationships of convenience with the same objects and events to which addicts get addicted—food, shopping, alcohol. Normally, these are relationships where there is no emotional bonding or illusion of intimacy. To addicts, however, the object or event starts to become more and more important as they try to get their emotional and intimacy needs met through this relationship. Eventually, it becomes their *primary* emotional relationship. Because they experience a mood change, they start to believe their emotional needs have been met. This is an illusion.

Once a person starts to look to an object or event for emotional stability, he or she is building the foundation of an addictive relationship with it. My definition of addiction, which is a variation of one developed in the chemical dependency field, is as follows: *addiction is a pathological love and trust relationship with an object or event.*

What exactly does this mean? To be pathological is to deviate from a healthy or normal condition. When someone is described as being ill, we mean that this person has moved away from what is considered “normal.” The word *pathological*, therefore, means “abnormal”; consequently, addiction is an abnormal relationship with an object or event.

All objects have a normal, socially acceptable function: food is to nourish; gambling is for fun and excitement; drugs are to help manage pain or overcome illness. Anyone using these objects or events in these ways would be seen as having a normal, healthy relationship with them. In an addiction, however, the addict departs from the normal and socially acceptable function of the object and sets up a pathological or abnormal relationship. The food, gambling, or drugs take on a new function: the addict develops a relationship with the event or object, hoping to get his or her needs met. This is the insanity of addiction, for people normally get emotional and intimacy needs met through a balanced combination of intimate connections with other people, themselves, their community, and with a Higher Power.

Addiction Is Not Reaching Out

These normal ways of achieving intimacy involve reaching out to life. We nurture ourselves by reaching out to others and then inward, to ourselves. In addiction, this reaching motion is almost totally inward to the point of withdrawing. Addiction exists within the person, and whenever addicts become preoccupied or act in addictive ways, this forces them to withdraw, to isolate themselves from others. The longer an addictive illness progresses, the less a person feels the ability to have meaningful relationships with others.

Addiction makes life very lonely and isolated, which creates more of a need for the addict to act out. When the addict hurts, he or she will act out by turning to the addiction for relief, just as someone else may turn to a spouse, a best friend, or spiritual beliefs. For the addict, the mood change created by acting out gives the illusion that a need has been met.

How Addicts Treat Themselves and Others

Because addiction is an illness in which the addict's primary relationship is with objects or events and not with people, the addict's relationships with people change to reflect this.

Normally, we manipulate objects for our own pleasure, to make life easier. Addicts slowly transfer this style of relating to objects to their interactions with people, treating them as one-dimensional objects to manipulate as well. For example, the sex addict sees people as sexual objects first and as people second. People around the addict get tired, frustrated, angry, and eventually fed up with being treated as objects. This leads to greater distance between others and the addict, who becomes even more isolated.

Addicts treat themselves as they treat others. In treating themselves as objects, addicts subject their emotions, mind, spirit, and body to many different dangers, including high levels of stress. As they continue to treat themselves as objects, they are often led to some form of breakdown.

Objects Are Predictable

Addicts begin to trust the addictive mood change caused by their addiction to an object or event because it's consistent and predictable. This is the seductive part of addiction.

- If you are a drug addict and you take a certain drug, you'll experience a predictable mood change.
- If you are addicted to gambling and you start to gamble, you'll experience a predictable mood change.
- If you are a compulsive eater, you'll experience a predictable mood change when you overeat.

The same goes for sex addicts, workaholics, addictive spenders, and people suffering from any other type of addiction—addiction causes them to experience a predictable mood change. Because addiction is predictable for addicts, they believe it can be trusted. Addicts rely upon a mood change, and the mood change comes through for them—in the beginning.

People, on the other hand, may not always come through. An addict may be in need of emotional support, so she goes to her best friend, only to find her in greater need of emotional support than the addict. When situations like this occur, the addict concludes that objects are more dependable than people.

If you were raised in an addictive or abusive family, you may have learned not to trust people. This will make you susceptible to the seductive illusion of comfort created by the predictable mood change offered by addiction.

Misplaced Priorities

Practicing addicts want to be first and demand to come first. Their wants become all-important. Objects have no wants or needs; thus, in a relationship with an object the addict can always come first. This quality is very attractive to the addict, and also fits well into the belief system created by emotional logic. A practicing addict comes to trust the addiction, not people. To trust in people is a threat to the addictive process. For the practicing addict, the object comes first, people second.

All of us want fulfillment and are looking for relationships that will give us this. Addiction is a relationship problem; it is a destructive but committed relationship. Like two people involved in a destructive relationship that makes no logical sense to others, yet goes on for years, the addict is having a destructive relationship with an object or event.

In its beginning stages, addiction is an attempt to emotionally fulfill oneself. In many ways, addiction is a normal process gone awry. Most friendships begin with emotional attachment and are based on getting emotional needs fulfilled. Addiction is a pathological way of trying to reach this fulfillment. A compulsive gambler is not chasing the win, though this is what he tells himself. What the addict trusts and depends on is the false promise and false sense of fulfillment produced by the preoccupation with gambling and the predictable mood change.

When Addictive Relationships Are Formed

There are times when all of us are susceptible to forming addictive relationships, such as after a great loss. With the loss comes pain and the need to replace the lost relationship. A good example of this is retirement, when the loss of a work relationship is often replaced by an addictive relationship. As people get older, friends pass away, and long-standing relationships start to change, many elderly people form addictive relationships with, for example, television or alcohol and other drugs. They come to trust in these objects, knowing they will be there tomorrow.

People may be susceptible to forming an addictive relationship at other times, as well:

- After the loss of a loved one (the closer the relationship the more likely the change).
- After a loss of status.
- After a loss of ideals or dreams.
- After the loss of friendships.
- When facing new social challenges or social isolation (for example, moving to a new community).
- When leaving one's family.

Seductiveness in Addiction

What makes the addictive relationship so attractive is the mood change it produces. It works every time; it's guaranteed. No human relationship can make this kind of guarantee. Addicts trust they will experience a mood change if they perform certain behaviors. For example, by gorging himself, the food addict can temporarily control his life and the way he feels. Thus, through acting out, the addict feels a sense of control. This helps to counteract the total sense of powerlessness and unmanageability the addict is feeling on a deeper, more personal level.

The addictive process is very seductive. Addiction is a process of buying into false and empty promises: the false promise of relief, the false promise of emotional security, the false sense of fulfillment, and the false sense of intimacy with the world. A compulsive gambler doesn't chase the event (gambling) itself, but what the event emotionally comes to represent—a symbol of fulfillment.

It is not only the relationship with a particular object that is dangerous for addicts; it's also dangerous to chase this form of dishonesty. Finding emotional fulfillment through an object or event is an illusion. It's dishonest to believe an object or event can bring anything more than a temporary mood change. Compulsive gamblers are not chasing the win. If the win was important, gamblers would stop when they won. They are chasing the action, the excitement, the moment, and eventually they chase the losing, for this allows them a reason to chase again. Continued dishonesty of this type can produce a new addictive relationship with another object, as objects can easily be replaced. Indeed highs come in many forms.

A friend of mine has a plaque on his wall that speaks well for the seduction of addiction.

fooling people is serious business, but when you fool yourself it becomes fatal.

Intensity Mistaken for Intimacy

Emotionally, addicts get intensity and intimacy mixed up. Acting out is a very intense experience for addicts because it involves going against themselves.

- For compulsive eaters, buying a bag of groceries, eating most of the contents, and then making themselves throw up is a very intense experience.
- For sex addicts, entering pornographic bookstores and knowing they'll not leave before having sex with a complete stranger and knowing there's a chance they could be arrested is a very intense experience.
- For gambling addicts, watching a football game and knowing the team they have picked must win by six points so they can make a past-due house payment is a very intense experience.

During the trance created by acting out, addicts may feel very excited, very shameful, and very scared. Whatever they are feeling, they feel it intensely. Addicts feel very connected to the moment because of the intensity.

Intensity, however, is not intimacy, though addicts repeatedly get them mixed up. The addict has an intense experience and believes it is a moment of intimacy. For example, an alcoholic sees his relationships with drinking buddies as deep and very personal, but they slip away when the event of drinking doesn't occur.

I've learned a lot about the differences between intensity and intimacy from my fifteen-year-old niece, who is at an age where intensity and intimacy are often confused. She believes she is "totally in love" with a boy in her class, and is sure they will marry. She has already decided how many children they will have and what to name them. It would be an exercise in futility to try and talk her out of her emotional beliefs. All of us around her know she is misled by intensity. What she is feeling is very intense, but not very intimate.

Adolescence is a time of learning the differences between intensity and intimacy. Adolescents make promises of friendship for life and make extensive plans for the future based on this, only to see the friendships fade. Intimacy is something that is slowly built over time. Adolescents often have difficulty seeing beyond the moment.

Practicing addicts are also living for the present moment, using emotional logic. Emotionally, addicts act like adolescents and are often described as adolescent in behavior and attitude. After all, many issues addicts struggle with are the same issues that face adolescents. The difference is that addicts stay trapped in an adolescent stage as long as their illness is in progress.

Objects and Events That Become Addicting

What do different addictive objects and events (eating, gambling, chemicals, and sex) have in common? It's their ability to produce a positive and pleasurable mood change. This is the addictive potential of an object or event.

Both washing dishes and gambling are events, but for most people, washing dishes produces a much smaller pleasurable mood change. Milk and alcohol are substances, but people do not become addicted to milk because it does not have the same mood-changing quality as alcohol. Thus, the ability to produce a pleasurable mood change is needed for an object or event to have an addictive potential.

Availability of an object or event helps determine whether people will choose that form of addiction. The more available addictive objects or events are, the greater the number of people who form addictive relationships with them. Gambling is becoming more widely available; therefore, we are seeing a rise in the number of addictive gamblers.

A person can switch an addictive relationship from object to object and event to event. Switching from object to object helps create the illusion that the "problem has been taken care of," when in reality one addictive relationship has replaced another. This buys more time for the addict. An addict may stop using speed and pot and "just" take up drinking. Similarly, the recovering alcoholic who hasn't accepted his addictive relationship with alcohol may slowly develop an addictive relationship with food, putting on fifty or sixty pounds and remaining as emotionally isolated as he was when he was drinking.

Recovering and active addicts need to recognize that at times they will want to interact with the world through their addictions. When faced with stress, for example, addicts may want to reach for an object instead of reaching for people or their own spirituality to cope with the outside world.

Once an addictive relationship has developed, the active addict or recovering addict will always see the world in a different perspective. Like any other major illness, addiction is an experience that changes people in permanent ways. This is why it's so important that people in recovery attend Twelve Step and other self-help meetings on a regular basis; the addictive logic remains deep inside of them and looks for an opportunity to reassert itself in the same or a different form. Recovering addicts must continue to go to meetings and work the program because they continue to be addicts. Recovery is the continued acceptance of addiction and the continuous monitoring of the addictive personality in whatever form it may take.

Addiction must be viewed as a continuum because of its progressive nature. Some people teeter on a thin line between abuse and addiction for a long time. Addiction is different from periodic, or even frequent, abuse. This difference will become much more clear in the following pages that describe the *addictive personality*: the different changes that occur to addicts, their world, and the people who surround them as addiction develops.