



Addiction

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Abstract

Addiction can come in many different forms and it is the uncontrollable desire to either use a substance such as drugs or alcohol or to participate in an activity, such as gambling or having sexual intercourse. Addiction can occur with numerous other things, such as food, shopping, or going on the internet; the term “addiction” does not just apply to harmful substances or habits.

Introduction

When most people think of addiction, they picture a homeless person sitting on the sidewalk asking for money that, presumably, will get used to buy a bottle of alcohol or some type of drug. Although this may be true in some stories of addiction, there are a countless number of different cases and different circumstances that account for what it means to be addicted. Addiction is not something that can be easily defined, because it every person in a different way. There are many different kinds of addiction and it can affect anyone. There is one factor that is common throughout all stories of addiction, however. Addiction does not only affect one person’s life, but instead affects the lives of all of that person’s family and friend and the social fabric of communities.

Addiction can come in many different forms and it is the uncontrollable desire to either use a substance such as drugs or alcohol or to participate in an activity, such as gambling or having sexual intercourse [1]. Addiction can occur with numerous other things, such as food, shopping, or going on the internet; the term “addiction” does not just apply to harmful substances or habits. Addiction is a disease that manifests in the brain of an individual (HBO). When a person either takes a drug or repeatedly performs a pleasurable behavior, receptors in the brain start to seek the substance or behavior in order to once again find that same pleasure. Once the action or substance has been repeated multiple times, the brain becomes dependent on it. With dependence, the drug or action starts to become the most important thing in a person’s life. At this point, people often start to ignore their better judgment and to start to use the substance or perform the action obsessively. After a while, addicts develop a tolerance to their addiction. When tolerance occurs, more and more of the substance or action is needed in order to produce the same effect in the brain. At this point, addicts do not feel normal unless they are participating in the addictive activity. By the time tolerance sets in, the addiction is full blown and has completely taken over the individual’s life [2].

Many people are under the false impression that addiction cannot happen to them or anyone in their families. However, addiction can happen to anyone, regardless of how he or she was brought up, the type of family he or she came from, and religious beliefs [3]. Many people that do not believe they can become addicted are also of the mindset that addiction is not a disease. There is a strong argument against considering addiction as a disease, because not everyone completely understands how the brain works and the effects that substances have on the brain. It then becomes the belief that addicts are weak people with no self-control that choose addiction because it is the “easier” path to take [3]. The lack of respect for and distrust of people who have an addiction problem also contributes too many addicts trying to hide their problems, and therefore no help is given to the people who clearly need it.

As addiction becomes more and more overwhelming in an individual’s life, it also starts to affect his or her family and friends. Addiction has many effects on the family system. Different roles must be taken on by each member of the family in order to live with or be around the addict. It has also been found that addiction tends to lead to divorce and domestic violence, both towards spouses and children [4]. Families often start getting involved when they start to question the addict about his or her behavior. As time goes on and the addict’s family starts to realize the enormity of the problem, they start to be more concerned and usually have the best intentions to help their family member. At this point, depression can start to spread throughout the family as the situation seems more and more hopeless [4]. Because it is natural for a family to take care of its members, the addict’s family often starts taking on the responsibilities that the addict is no longer capable of handling by his or herself [5]. By picking up the addict’s slack, however, family members are unknowingly enabling the addict to continue the destructive behavior. Although some of these actions, such as caring for any children, are necessary, other actions such as supply the addict with money or paying his or her bills are behaviors that ultimately help the addict to fall further and further into the addiction. Friends of an addict often will give their friend a place to sleep if they have nowhere else to turn, and may also be helping to support the habit. Helping the addict eventually becomes a drain on the family, both financially and emotionally. Addicts often will ask their family for money to support their habit, and if they cannot get it they may also steal from the people they love the most. Also, with so much focus on one family member, the family system begins to deteriorate as the individuals forget to focus on themselves and on everything else that is going on aside from the addiction [5]. After a long time of trying to help or change the addict, some families will decide to cut their addicted family member off completely, while others give an ultimatum about getting help. Still, other families might choose to continue caring for the addict in the mindset that he or she is safer at home than out on the street. Whatever the outcome, the addiction of one person became a major family problem.

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As much as addiction affects the other adults in an addict's family, far more affected are the children that are experiencing a parent or other close family member fall into an addiction. Children living in this situation are greatly effected both at the time of the addiction as well as later in life. First off, children living with an addict might become a scapegoat or a victim of abuse for the addict. Depression and anxiety disorders are common symptoms of children who are raised by or around an addict. They are also more likely to exhibit psychosocial and psychiatric issues [6]. There also tends to be a higher level of conflict. Addicts, especially when they are not getting their fix, often feel very desperate, aggravated, and frustrated and can take these feelings out on their families at home. Many times children are witnesses to this anger, and are also frequently caught in the addict's angry path. This anger and a lack of parenting skills often lead to decreased communication, isolation, stress, and illness. These types of home often simultaneously lack structure, but expect the children to take on responsibilities beyond their cognitive or skill levels [6]. Later in life, children of addicts make up the highest risk group for becoming an addict because addiction tends to run in families. This factor is based both on biology as well as environment. A correlation has been found between genetics of addicts and the genetics of their children that seems to point toward a relationship between having an addicted parent and experimenting with addictive substances [6]. The environment is a factor because children grow up seeing addiction as a normal part of life and being in a family, so that they model their behaviors after the dysfunction that occurred when they were younger. In this way, addiction can be a vicious cycle that can continue for many generations after it begins.

Unfortunately, addiction can take hold of a child's life even before they are born. Women who are addicted to harmful substances such as alcohol, tobacco, or drugs put their children at great risk if they continue to abuse the substances during pregnancy. A child born after being prenatally exposed to addictive substances have a large risk of becoming addicted themselves, and start having painful withdrawal symptoms shortly after birth. There are many other risk factors associated with children being exposed to drugs or alcohol in the womb, including Fetal Alcohol Syndrome. Many psychological and developmental problems can occur under these conditions, and the infant will most likely carry these problems throughout the rest of his or her life. Some of these problems include low birth weight, trouble socializing with other children, poor language skills, and behavioral issues. All of these issues can snowball and lead for an even harder life for the child, which, unfortunately, had no choice in the matter due to his or her mother's addiction [7].

The most important thing for an addict to do to be able to overcome his or her addiction is to seek out profession treatment. There are different types of treatment available for addicts, but all of them focus on detoxification of the substance or habit, as well as intervening into the addict's life in order to help them overcome urges to go back to the addiction [8]. Treatment can occur in a live-in rehabilitation center, in

one-on-one counseling, or in a group therapy situation once the initial detoxification has occurred. It is important to note that relapse can happen at any time, and that the habit of addiction is incredibly hard to break. Most treatment programs for addiction focus on helping the addict to change his or her life, and also on helping him or her find a different purpose in life now that they no longer have the addiction to focus on. Twelve step programs are often implemented as part of the treatment [8]. Above all, support systems are needed for every person going through addiction withdrawal and treatment. Support systems give former addicts somewhere to turn, and people to turn to who have been through the same experiences and can also attest to the benefits that come with breaking the addiction for good.

Whatever kind of treatment is sought out by the addict, it is quintessential to also include his or her family in the treatment process. Every family member is affected by addiction in some way, and it is important for them to all learn how to become a functioning family again. Relationships must be worked on and trust must be regained. Treatment is not an easy process for anyone involved, but it is the only way for the addict and his or her family members to start rebuilding their lives. One thing that everyone involved in treatment should know is that the process is a difficult one and, especially for the addict, it never really becomes much easier. Every single day is a struggle and everyone involved needs to learn to live life one day at a time, and also how to deal with disappointments and relapse, should they occur. Above all, it is important to remember that taking the first step towards recovery is the most important one, and once an addict becomes determined to turn his or her life around, the journey to getting and staying clean becomes that much more attainable.

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