

THE EXPERIENCE OF ADDICTION

Let's imagine a normal person. We'll call him Joe. Joe comes home after a long day of work and has one beer to relax. Some nights he has a second beer with dinner, but only very rarely does he get drunk. Joe used to drink heavily in college. He even got pretty deep into cocaine for a while, but once he graduated, got married, and landed a decent job, Joe seemed to lose interest in getting drunk and high. He simply likes working and being married too much to let that sort of thing get in the way. Frequently, Joe will go without his daily beer for long stretches of time, for example when his in-laws visit or when he just slips out of the habit for a while. These periods without beer cause Joe no distress.

Let's imagine another normal person called Betty. Betty smoked marijuana every day of her life between the ages of 14 and 37. During this time she also became a chronic overeater. When she turned 37, Betty began having anxiety attacks. She saw a doctor, who suggested that she try weaning herself off pot. Betty did so, and after a few hard weeks she found her mood improved greatly. She discovered that she had more energy than ever and began to exercise regularly. Betty never went back to drug use, and has maintained a healthy diet. When she looks back on her years of pot smoking and overeating, Betty feels as if they had happened to another person. She is never tempted to get high. Betty likes her new life.

If you are an addict, Joe and Betty will seem like strange creatures to you. What is wrong with them? Shouldn't they be miserable? How can they do what they do? How can Joe go from coke-head to casual drinker without any effort? How can Betty just stop drug abuse and overeating without serious struggle? The answer is that Joe and Betty are normal people, and normal people are just built differently than addicts. Normal people can use and even abuse substances and behaviors to the point of becoming physically dependent upon them. They may even make many sacrifices to continue their using. But when it comes time to stop or moderate, normal people can do so on their own power. When normal people stop using or moderate, their lives get better, not worse.

As addicts, we can never use in moderation. Once we start using, we lose all control over our intake. Often this means a spree----we use until circumstances stop us. Either we run out of money, end up in jail, our body quits on us, or otherwise cannot get what we want to use. Not being able to get what we want is agony for us. We become totally Preoccupied with our own discomfort and start obsessing about using again. Even when we manage to stay abstinate for a long time, our misery does not leave us. We are broken people without our drug. Once we start using we cannot stop; once we finally stop, we can't live normal lives.

The experience of addiction has two parts; a compulsion and obsession. We experience a compulsion when we start using and find that we lose control over our consumption. Usually, this means that we cannot stop using until we are forced to by

circumstance. Occasionally, the experience of compulsion is sporadic, meaning that sometimes we can use a limited amount, and other times we cannot, but we are never in control of what the outcome will be once we start using. As most addictions progress, the compulsion is experienced more consistently. We may begin our addictions with the experience of some control, but as we continue to use, our loss of control becomes more severe until every time we pick up, we fall into a spree. As our sprees become longer and more demanding, our addiction begins to have consequences. We begin to lose the people and things that we love, but we are still unable to stop ourselves from using. Many of us were not able to recognize the compulsion in our experience until we had lost almost everything we cared about.

We experience an obsession when we are trying to stay abstinent and are overpowered by thoughts of using. Obsession can take a variety of forms. An intrusive obsession is a thought of using that seems to enter our minds from out of nowhere. When we are hit by an intrusive obsession, we find ourselves suddenly dropping our plans and responsibilities, and pursuing the substance or behavior that we crave.

A reoccurring obsession is a thought of using that enters our minds over and over again throughout the day. Fighting with this thought consumes all of our energy. We try to remind ourselves of the importance of not using, of all the things we will lose if we use again, and of what always happens to us when we are on a spree, but the thought keeps coming back and seems to grow stronger over time. If we are able to hold out against the reoccurring obsession, we become exhausted and depressed. We are easily irritated and find that normal daily tasks require an enormous amount of effort. Even if we don't use, the reoccurring obsession wins by beating us down.

A third kind of obsession is called circumstantial obsession. We experience a circumstantial obsession when we are presented with the opportunity to use and cannot think of any good reason not to, even though we have everything to lose. We may give ourselves some silly excuse for using, or we may not think at all. Before we know it, we are deep into active addiction again, wondering what happened to our common sense.

A fourth and final kind of obsession is called the fundamental obsession. The fundamental obsession may not be experienced as a thought of using at all. Instead, we experience this obsession as a basic preoccupation with ourselves and how we feel. It is usually hard for us to identify the fundamental obsession at first, because it is so much a part of how we experience the world. It is like water to fish—we are so familiar with it that it is hard to see.

Those of us who have been abstinent for long periods of time without a spiritual solution know the pains of fundamental obsession all too well. Life is unsatisfying. We are constantly agitated and restless, even though we may be quite depressed. We are

We are unable to form meaningful or lasting relationships. We have a deep sense that life is treating us unfairly. People seem cruel and selfish to us; they ignore us and our needs. No matter what we try, we do not seem to be able to get any peace of mind. We are constantly trying to adjust the circumstances of our lives in an attempt to find some comfort. We may have a vague sense that something is wrong with us, but we do not know what it is.

Reoccurring, and circumstantial obsession may actually get easier to cope with over time, but the fundamental obsession only gets worse. The pain of daily living builds up inside us and we have to vent it somehow. Some of us become violent; others tax the patience of our friends with complaints. Many of us find some substance or behavior that provides us with temporary relief. In other words, we switch addictions in order to cope with the pain of fundamental obsession.

As addicts, we suffer from compulsion and obsession. This means that once we start using, we lose control over our intake. It also means that once we stop using, we are miserable and usually cannot stay stopped for very long. Those of us who do remain abstinent for long periods do so at the cost of great suffering. This puts us addicts in a pretty tough spot—we can use and suffer or not use and suffer. Fortunately, there is a third option. We can have a spiritual awakening. As addicts, our spiritual awakening begins when we are able to identify ourselves as addicts. This means finding examples of compulsion and obsession in our own experience.