

The Spirit of Addiction

By Jason Hosch, Ph.D.

What comes to mind when you hear the word, “addiction”? Is it the homeless alcoholic you saw the other day, or the drug addict? Is it that person on the news who was just arrested on charges of sex crimes against minors? Is it a co-worker who has a serious gambling problem, or an eating disorder? Is it a family member or a loved one with that problem you’d rather not talk about? Or perhaps, just maybe, is it you? Whoever or whatever it is that comes to your mind, I would venture to say that the feelings are not pleasant. No, addiction is not fun. It’s not warm and fuzzy. In fact, just thinking about it can be unsettling. And then there are those who themselves struggle with addictions – those who find themselves battling against a never-ending, overpowering world of shame, bondage, oppression, secrecy, and isolation.

Addiction undoubtedly has a spiritual nature. By “spiritual”, I am talking about the need we have to connect to the world and to our existence in a meaningful way. Our spirit is the essence of life – the life force within us. And it is one essential, but often overlooked, part of what makes us who we are as human beings. Maybe our spiritual nature is dismissed as irrelevant because it is not understood by much of the world. It can’t be easily measured, tested, or put to the scientific method. But yet, it does exist, and it is a vital part of what makes us who we are. In this article, we’ll take a look at addiction from a “holistic” perspective - one that considers the influences of body, soul, and spirit. We’ll look at some of the causes of addiction, at its effects on our lives, and at some of the treatment approaches for addiction that work. We will also look at some obstacles to recovery which often keep people from finding true healing, peace, and freedom from their addiction.

Let’s begin with an understanding of addiction in the body. In this context, addiction resides in the brain. It is an understatement to say that our brains are extremely complex, but they are. They also operate at a neurochemical level. When we talk about addiction, we’re really talking about the brain becoming neurochemically dependent on chemicals ingested into the body, or on chemicals the brain produces when we perform certain behaviors. As the brain develops a

dependence on these chemicals, it begins to "crave" them when they are not present. Over time, the brain also develops a resistance, or "tolerance" to this unnatural flood of chemicals, so we need more to obtain the desired effect. We also learn to associate different substances and behaviors with the relief of certain unpleasant emotions in our lives. Whatever kind of addiction we are talking about - sexual, chemical, food, anger, adrenaline, or relationship addiction – all tend to follow a very similar addictive cycle and pattern of dependence.

So what, might you ask, causes addiction? Why do some people become addicts and others don’t, despite similar life experiences they may have had? Why are some people said to have “addictive personalities”? Why are some people able to overcome their addictions while others remain defeated? In order to answer these and other questions, we need to look at the nature of addiction as it relates to both our soul and our spirit. When I speak of “soul”, I am referring to that part of us which includes our mind, will, and emotions. It also houses our temperament. Again, our spirit is the essence of life within us. As human beings, we were created to be in relationships – to connect with the soul and the spirit of others. Addicts have a problem in this area. They tend to be lonely people, starving for love, attention, and nurture. Many are angry that their needs have gone unmet, either as children or as adults. Oftentimes addicts, as children, did not form healthy attachments with their parents or with others. Now as adults, they may not know how to find real love, which is why many substitute addictive substances or behaviors for relationships. Whatever the case, addictions are reactions to gaping holes in a person’s life.

And so, we are talking about a problem of spiritual identity with addicts. For lack of the ability to form and/or maintain healthy relationships, addicts turn to addictive substitutes in hopes to fill the void. Soon the drug of choice takes over, it takes control of the person’s life, and a dependence takes shape. The sense of knowing oneself and one’s value drifts father and father away. One’s feeling of belonging and being an important part of the world is lost as the addiction progresses. Relationships become more and more superficial, the addict becomes increasingly isolated, and a spiritual “deadening” takes place. Addicts lose more and more of their ability to

influence their own thoughts and behaviors. They may stay isolated, or they may turn to other addicts who offer companionship with little or no fear of confrontation.

“At its core, addiction is a problem of a spiritual nature.”

Addiction is insidious, destructive, and unrelenting. And if you have ever known or tried to work with someone who is actively in their addiction, you know that it can be frustrating. I know addiction professionals who have gotten burned out in their work. I have seen their frustration when tools, techniques, and approaches were repeatedly met by the addict with resistance. I have also seen some lose hope when over time little or no progress could be seen from their treatment efforts.

So where is our hope to be if we want to help people who are struggling with an addiction - or “addictions” (by the way, very few addicts suffer from only one addiction)? If tools, techniques, methodologies, and approaches in-and-of-themselves are met with such resistance, what else do we have to work with? Let me give you a clue: let’s revisit the title of this article. If we go to the root of the addiction (forget all the frustrating behaviors), we will find there to be a spiritual void and an identity problem that needs our focus. All of addicts’ bizarre behaviors and their use of substances and attempts to self-medicate are all staggered attempts to fill a God-sized void in their lives. These people need to know who they are – they need a sense of identity. They need a sense of personal value. They need a sense of meaning and purpose to their existence. They need to feel that they belong. They need relationships with others, and a sense of connection in both soul and spirit. They need to know that they are loved, despite the poor choices they may have made, and the pain this may have caused for them and others.

How in the world do we accomplish all these things? Exactly – that’s what I thought. We don’t – at least not through “worldly ways”. At its core, addiction is a problem of a spiritual nature. If we are to have any lasting success from our efforts, we must approach treatment from a spiritual perspective. Granted, there are some

basic prerequisite conditions necessary for recovery to begin. These include that addicts not be actively using, and that they have some stabilization from their addiction. In some cases (particularly with chemical dependency and some other extreme cases with addiction), detoxification and inpatient treatment may be needed. From there, addicts may need to step down to partial hospitalization and/or outpatient treatment programs which will help them to develop healthy coping, communication, occupational, independent living, and social skills, as well as healthy support systems. Nonetheless, beyond this relatively brief period of time, recovery becomes a lifelong journey, the success of which depends on moment-by-moment choices.

We must realize too that along this road, the we are going to encounter some obstacles to recovery. These include first and foremost our sense of pride. It is by our very human nature that we tend to want things our way. We want to be in control, we want to stay in control, and we have a tendency toward devoting our lives to self-empowerment. The problem with this is that regardless of how much effort the addict devotes to overcoming his addiction, his life remains controlled and overpowered by his addiction. Step 1 of the 12-Step program of Alcoholics Anonymous is for the addict to admit that he is powerless over his addictions and compulsive behaviors, and that his life has become unmanageable. When he admits that his life is out of control, he is beginning to realize that his identity is lost (although this is probably not a conscious awareness at first). The addict must humble himself, acknowledge his limited ability to help himself, recognize the existence of a power greater than himself (Step 2), and make a decision to surrender his life and will to the care of God (Step 3). These three steps involve humility, an all-out trust in the sufficiency of God to manage our lives - which is the opposite of pride.

Another obstacle to recovery is the fact that we are more comfortable explaining everything in terms of the natural rather than the supernatural. While much of life is understandable in terms of our five senses, much more of life’s realities go beyond the natural. God designed us in a way that He should have a place of prominence in our lives. However, this basic design became

corrupted by the existence of sin in the world. We spend so much of our lives in efforts to restore ourselves to this original place of contentment, but often find ourselves turning to substitutes to fill the voids in our lives. So many addicts limit themselves by relying on their own power. The irony is that when we stop “limiting” ourselves, and through humility, faith, and trust we surrender our lives to God, we begin to open ourselves to truly limitless possibilities.

One more obstacle to recovery is that we as human beings are essentially spiritually blind. Our human nature has difficulty comprehending things of the spiritual nature. In fact, in this sense, this spiritual nature may seem like “nonsense” to many. Our natural eyes, for example, see what is comfortable as good, as well as what is painful and bad. Spiritual eyes, on the other hand, evaluate good on the basis of growth, not comfort. Spiritual eyes see joy and happiness as a by-product of relationships - not an entitlement, or an achievement goal resulting from our own efforts. Spiritual eyes see pain and suffering as necessary, but despair as optional. Spiritual eyes see our primary task being to glorify God by persevering in our love and service to others. Our natural eyes are inclined to see things the opposite way. We tend to glorify and exalt ourselves, judge others, and expect God to keep us comfortable in the process.

Addiction is complex, and it can be very confusing. As such, there are many differences of opinion in the world as to the etiology, prevention, and treatment of addictive disorders. Some people see addictions as “diseases”, while others see them as behaviors learned in response to the “complex interplay between heredity and environmental factors”. Still others argue in favor of genetic causes. This lack of agreement among experts has caused problems with prevention and treatment of addictions. Even so, many experts often continue to overlook the spiritual nature of addiction.

Whether we choose to admit it or not, there is a spiritual reality to addiction. For recovery to begin (following detoxification and stabilization, if required), one must recommit to nurturing one’s own spirit, and be ready and willing to receive healing from God. I am not talking here about religion, but rather, about a relationship with God. “Religion” refers to what we can “do” to be acceptable to God. “Relationship”, on the other

hand, centers on what God did to make us acceptable. Certainly God can and does work through various tools, techniques, methodologies, and approaches. However, I believe that it is only through such a relationship and spiritual experience that we can find true and lasting healing, peace, and freedom from addiction. The 12-Step program is a wonderful testament to this. Subsequently, a substantial amount of research shows 12-Step programs to be among the most effective approaches available for treating addiction. It is within these recovery programs that such spiritual virtues as surrender, hope, commitment, honesty, truth, willingness, humility, reflection, amendment, vigilance, attunement, and service are embraced. Many recovering addicts firmly grasp the spiritual aspect of recovery because most are extremely grateful to have such precious gifts returned: a sense of identity, a spiritual awareness, and the ability to connect with others in a meaningful, nurturing way. ■



Jason Hosch, Ph.D., is the director of Life Transitions Counseling in Orange Park, FL. He works with addiction recovery, anxiety, and a variety of other mental health issues. For more information, go to www.lifetransitions.cc.