



Breaking Free from Addictions

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L O O K I N G A T L I F E

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In November 2013, newspapers carried a report of the sad story of a young man who was found dead in his home in Penang, Malaysia, slumped over the keyboard in front of his computer screen. He had just spent over 15 hours gaming at a cybercafé, and was reported to have died of a heart attack. It was suspected that his addiction to computer games had killed him.

Addiction is a global problem and people are addicted to many things. There is the gambling addict who ruins her life by losing all her money; the drug addict who is reduced to robbing people in order to support his deadly addiction; the alcoholic who destroys her life and family with her insatiable addiction to drink; and the sex addict whose addiction to internet pornography takes over most of his waking hours and robs him of a healthy and normal life.

A Chemical or Emotional Dependence?

Some addictions are physiological in nature. In the abuse of drugs, smoking and alcohol, for example, people develop a chemical addiction. Others may not involve substance abuse. But they all share something in common: emotional and psychological dimensions that make the addiction powerful. Scientists have discovered that when one engages in behaviour that brings about some degree of pleasure or enjoyment, “feel-good” chemicals (such as dopamine) are released. These chemicals give the person an emotional high.

This feeling of euphoria, however, does not last long. Hence it leads to a craving for another round of the same euphoria, compelling the person to continually seek the object (such as alcohol) or behaviour (such as gambling). Soon, the person becomes enslaved by the object or behaviour pattern, and loses control. Research shows that what was once thought to be applicable only to chemicals acting on the brain—such as drugs, alcohol and nicotine—can also come into play in addictive behaviours. This is best understood by looking briefly at how we are wired to learn, remember and handle pleasurable experiences.

Pleasure, Memory and Learning

A student who studies hard for an exam and does very well naturally feels happiness and a sense of elation at having achieved success. The brain records such experiences, and the feelings of pleasure act on what is called the “reward circuit” in the brain. Powerful neurotransmitters called dopamine are released in the nucleus accumbens—a cluster of nerve cells below the cerebral cortex. The resulting sense of satisfaction and pleasure is remembered by the hippocampus, and the nearby amygdala develops a conditioned reflex. In this case, the sight of textbooks now motivates the student to study hard in anticipation of the pleasure of success in his studies.

This process is essential for human beings to learn behavioural patterns that help them survive and succeed. Patterns of behaviour that help us survive and succeed are particularly

powerful when they also bring about satisfaction and pleasure. For example, we enjoy eating so that we can survive. This is how human beings function.

However, this process can malfunction. Destructive behaviour patterns can take over the pleasure-memory-motivation learning process. For example, if a person were to take drugs, these powerful stimulants would lead to a rapid and huge release of dopamines which flood the nucleus accumbens, giving the person an exceptional high. But the effects wear off quickly, leading the drug user to long for the euphoric feelings and prompt him to take another dose of the drug. In this way, he becomes hooked. Substances and behaviours that cause such addictive behaviour are powerful because they release as much as ten times the normal levels of dopamine, quickly and surely every time. This is the power of addiction.

At the same time, the brain has its own way of coping with the flood of dopamine caused by the drug. It takes physiological and chemical actions to make itself less sensitive to the dopamine. As a result, the drug user over time has to take increasingly larger quantities of the drug to achieve the same effect. This process is called “tolerance”, and leads to a worsening of the drug abuser’s condition.

When an addictive substance or behaviour is withheld from an addict, it can produce strong adverse reactions in his body and mind that are called “withdrawal symptoms”. These

represent the body's fierce cravings for the addictive substances. A person suffering from alcoholism who has no opportunity to consume alcohol, for example, may develop physical symptoms and mental confusion. This is why patients who are put through "cold turkey" treatment can develop severe physical and mental disturbances for a while. Such treatment, which is the complete withholding of addictive substances or behaviour patterns, is said to work by breaking the cycle of craving and conditioning.

Psychological Dependence

Pleasure, reward, memory and motivation are connected in a normal way. But addiction hijacks this process and overwhelms it in an overpowering way. As increasing amounts of addictive substances and behaviour are needed to produce the same results due to tolerance, they create correspondingly powerful conditioned reflexes. For example, the mere sight of a hypodermic needle can create a strong compulsion in a heroin addict to take the drug again. A whiskey bottle on a restaurant shelf can produce strong reactions in a person suffering or recovering from alcoholism. Likewise, walking past a betting booth can produce strong temptation in a gambling addict.

Such strong motivations can lead to actions of frantic proportions. An addict may be compelled to engage in desperate measures like stealing to pay for his addictive behaviour or worse. Imprisoned in this addiction, he ends up in bondage, with no power to release himself

from it. His life may slide down the path of desperation and destruction, with his normal life disrupted, and social and family life destroyed.

Are You Suffering from Addiction?

Three questions can help you determine whether you are suffering from addiction:

- *Do you use more of the substance or engage in the behaviour more often than in the past?*
- *Do you have withdrawal symptoms when you don't have the substance or when you are not engaged in the behaviour?*
- *Have you ever lied to anyone about your use of the substance or extent of your behaviour?*

Addiction in Modern Society

Are you addicted to your smartphone or laptop? Do you check your mobile device often for messages, even when you are on a holiday, or when you are dining with your family?

In an experiment conducted in the early 20th century, a Japanese psychiatrist isolated patients from people and normal stimuli. They were placed in solitary confinement in a room for seven days, with no books, newspapers or communication devices. After a few days, these patients craved for various things—a newspaper to read, positive feedback from others, certain kinds of food and so on. The solitary confinement revealed their own addictions, and made them aware of the many driving forces in life—some

of which were destructive and enslaving.

Today, however, many people live unaware of the forces that enslave them. They are surrounded by things, lifestyles and behavioural patterns that can easily become addictive. Some of these are particularly dangerous—alcoholism, drug addiction, gambling addiction, addiction to pornography, uncontrolled gluttony, or any habit that threatens to displace the most important things in life, whether it be family, health or one’s relationship with God. The Bible declares that “a man is a slave to whatever has mastered him” (2 Peter 2:19).

In his book *The Three Edwards*, historical novelist Thomas Costain describes the life of Raynald III, a 14th century duke in what is now Belgium. The grossly overweight Raynald was often called by his Latin nickname, Crassus, which means “fat”. After a violent quarrel, Raynald’s younger brother Edward led a successful revolt against him. Edward captured Raynald, but did not kill him. Instead, he built a room around Raynald in the Nieuwkerk castle and promised him that he could regain his title and property as soon as he was able to leave the room. This would not have been difficult for most people, as the room had several windows and a door of near-normal size, and none were locked or barred.

The problem, however, was Raynald’s size. To regain his freedom, the overweight duke needed to lose weight. But Edward knew his older brother well, and sent a variety of delicious

foods every day. Instead of dieting his way out of prison, Raynald grew fatter. When Duke Edward was accused of cruelty, he had a ready answer: “My brother is not a prisoner. He may leave when he so wills.” Raynald stayed in that room for ten years and was not released until Edward died in battle. By then, his health was so ruined that he died within a year—a prisoner of his own appetite.

There are many people like Raynald who are prisoners of their own appetite, whether it is lust, greed, gluttony or something else. Raynald could have dieted his way out of his own prison to freedom. But his appetite mastered him and he had no self-control.

Spiritual Aspects of Addiction

Being spiritual beings, whatever we experience has spiritual dimensions. This is true for addiction too.

We live in an abnormal world, in which we experience the results of the fall of human beings. This refers to the actions of the original pair of human beings, Adam and Eve, who were created and blessed by God. Though they were placed by God in a lovely garden where they had all they needed, they chose to eat the forbidden fruit that God warned them not to eat (Genesis 3). They were given the freedom to choose good, but they abused that freedom to choose evil.

As a result, we now suffer from bondage to decay (Romans 8:20-21). As the Bible puts it, “the whole world is a prisoner of sin” (Galatians 3:22). This sense of being imprisoned in our own

rebellion against God and in our own desires gone wrong is experienced in different aspects of our lives—in our private innermost world, in our families and workplaces, and in our society.

We are made with a God-sized, God-shaped vacuum in our souls. Until we find God, who alone can satisfy our deepest desires and needs, we are bound to find substitutes for Him. These things—or anything that is allowed to take God's place—have a power to torment us, enslave us and destroy our lives.

The Experience of Sin and Bondage

The Bible records the words of a man who was deeply aware of his spiritual helplessness and the powerful persistence of sin in his life. In his letter to the Romans, Paul poignantly describes his frustrating and devastating condition in this way:

“I do not understand what I do. For what I do want to do I do not do, but I what I hate I do . . . I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it” (Romans 7:15, 18-20).

He goes on to lament:

“So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me . . . I

see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work in my members. What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?” (Romans 7:21-24).

Here is a man who no longer enjoys his sinful habits but finds himself enslaved to them. He cries out for help and longs to break free from his bondage. His condition is like that of the man who is described in another part of the Bible: “a dog returns to its vomit” and “a sow that is washed goes back to her wallowing in the mud” (2 Peter 2:22). No wonder Paul cries out: “What a wretched man I am!”

But, he acknowledges his own helplessness—which, we will see later, is the beginning of a recovery process—and finds the answer to his own question of who will rescue him. He says, **“Thanks be to God—through Jesus Christ our Lord!” (Romans 7:25).**

The answer to problems of our sinful habits in general, or addictive behaviours in particular, lies outside ourselves. We are helpless to overcome sin and addiction with our own strength; we need help from God.

Breaking Free from Addiction

The road to freedom begins with an acknowledgment that one has a real problem and needs help. Denial does not help. The person who falls deeper and deeper into addiction is one who rationalises that he is still in control and

that he does not have any real problem with an addictive behaviour.

This is what a woman suffering from gambling addiction may tell herself. After her initial euphoria over a small windfall from a “one-armed bandit”, she continues to insert coins in the hope of making more windfalls. The more she loses, the more she tells herself that the next time will be different. After serious losses, she finally loses control of herself and continues to gamble, but assures herself that she is still in control and that things will turn out well in the end.

Unless this woman admits that she has a gambling problem, she is not going to be helped significantly. This is why the first step of Alcoholics Anonymous’ 12-step programme for helping those suffering or recovering from alcoholism is a humble acceptance that one has a problem with alcoholism and is unable to help himself.

There are many treatment programmes to help those suffering from various forms of addiction. They range from cognitive to behavioural approaches, and include: convincing yourself of the harm that your addictive behaviour causes (which is why pictures of pathological damage caused by smoking are printed on cigarette packs); avoiding situations or places that might tempt you to engage in your addictive behaviour; and entering a programme that helps to link your addictive behaviour with unpleasant experiences. Halfway houses, strong disciplinary regimens, counselling, supervision and other methods have also produced various levels of success.

However, recovering from deep addiction is not easy. The relapse rate is often significantly high. Using a faith-based approach helps to produce better result, and there are several Christian halfway houses, institutions and ministries that help those addicted to drugs, alcohol and gambling.

The Twelve-Step Approach

The Twelve-Step approach is used not only by the Alcoholics Anonymous, but also by other groups that minister to people with different forms of addiction. The original Twelve Steps are:

- 1. We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable.*
- 2. Came to believe that a power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.*
- 3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.*
- 4. Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.*
- 5. Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.*
- 6. Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.*
- 7. Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.*
- 8. Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.*

9. *Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.*
10. *Continued to take personal inventory, and when we were wrong, promptly admitted it.*
11. *Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood Him, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.*
12. *Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all our affairs.*

The process of recovery begins with owning the problem—that is, acknowledging that one has an addiction and is helpless to overcome it. The sufferer then turns to a higher power—God—for help. This spiritual dimension brings him in contact with the spiritual realities connected with his problem, and with the way out of the addiction.

Recovery from addiction—and for that matter, one's sinfulness—requires a power beyond ourselves. We are helpless on our own, but Jesus brings spiritual power that saves and frees us.

Jesus, Salvation and Forgiveness

Jesus removes the darkness within us with His light. In our natural state, we are estranged from

God, from others, and from ourselves. We are guilty of sinning against God, but Jesus, who died on the cross for your sins and mine, brings forgiveness, reconciliation with God and peace within and in our relationships.

What He requires from us is to acknowledge our need to be saved from our sins and to place our trust in Him as our Saviour. We do this by opening our hearts to Him, confessing our sins to Him, and welcoming Him into our hearts. He says: “Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in” (Revelation 3:20).

When Jesus enters your life, it opens the door to radical change, as countless millions have experienced over the centuries:

*Amazing grace,
How sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me.
I once was lost, but now I'm found;
Was blind, but now I see.*

Jesus, Freedom and Victory

Jesus enters our life not only as our Saviour, but also as our Lord. Our lives are often filled with darkness and chaos; there is disorder and dysfunction. We are like a land without a government, or a country torn by civil war.

Jesus enters our life to restore order and to establish His rule. When He rules us, there is peace and joy, order and beauty. The Bible describes Jesus encountering a demonised man who displayed the strangest of behaviour. The

poor man lived among tombs and was often chained to keep him from endangering others. But he could not be subdued. He lived a lonely and miserable life, crying out and cutting himself with stones (Mark 5:1-5). Jesus freed the man from the powers that tormented him, and restored him to health and normalcy.

Therefore, inviting Jesus into our life is an important first step, pointing us in the right direction on what for many may be a long road to recovery. As addiction is rooted in sin, the solution begins with asking Jesus to free us from the latter.

Jesus, who once calmed the raging seas with His word and saved His disciples from drowning (Mark 4:35-41), has said that He came to set prisoners free (Luke 4:18). He continues to free those who are imprisoned in different kinds of prisons, including the prison of addiction. As the Lord of lords and Son of God, He has the authority and power to do so.

The Bible declares that God “gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Corinthians 15:57). Indeed, if you ask Him, He will enter your life to set your house in order, to remove the mess, ugliness and all that brings shame, and replace these with beauty and peace, holiness and health. The change may not be immediate, but the transformation is guaranteed. Charles Wesley’s hymn expresses his experience:

*Long my imprisoned spirit lay,
Fast bound in sin and nature’s night;
Thine eye diffused a quickening ray—*

*I woke, the dungeon flamed with light;
My chains fell off, my heart was free,
I rose, went forth, and followed Thee.
My chains fell off, my heart was free,
I rose, went forth, and followed Thee.*

Making It Personal

There is hope for those who are trapped in sinful habits and practices. Jesus pointed out that though “everyone who sins is a slave to sin” (John 8:34), He has the power to set us free. And when He frees us, we are free indeed (John 8:36). When we put our trust in Jesus, we are given new power and freedom.

Honestly acknowledging our helplessness and trusting in Jesus’ rescue puts us in the relationship with God that we were made for. We invite you to use the following prayer:

Dear God, I’m sorry that I’ve not lived my life trusting in You. Thank you for sending Jesus to die on the cross to pay the penalty for my rebellion. With Your help, I will now put my faith in You and trust in Jesus as my Rescuer. Please help me to stop living by my own ways, and instead let You take control of my life.

If these words express your heart’s desire, you have entered into a personal relationship with God! We encourage you to start attending a church and let them know of your decision. You can also write to Our Daily Bread Ministries to request for related biblical materials.

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