

Is Addiction Really a *Disease*?

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It has become common to refer to alcoholism and drug addiction as a *disease*. However, there remains considerable confusion, and for some, skepticism regarding how addiction qualifies as a disease. After all, don't people simply *choose* to do drugs? Can they simply not *choose* to do drugs? It also seems apparent that the majority of addicted people possess very similar personality traits that would lead one to surmise that addiction is really more of a psychological or character issue rather than a disease.

Let's begin our effort to understand addiction with some simple facts.

Fact 1: The use of addictive substances is common.

Over 90% of adults in the U.S. report they have consumed an alcoholic beverage. Somewhat surprisingly, over 50% of adults in the U.S. report they have at some point in time used an "illegal" drug, with marijuana frequently being reported. There are also a significant number of people reporting cocaine use, or use of an opiate painkiller not prescribed to them. So, the fact is *the use of addictive drugs is very common and normal within the U.S.* Yet, we also know that the majority of people who report alcohol or other drug use are *not addicted*. So, the question becomes, what sets the addicted person apart from the person who consumed addictive drugs, but did not become addicted?

Fact 2: People react differently to drugs.

The answer lies in a rather simple reality. When any two people take *any* drug, they can have a very different reaction. All drugs have side effects. Side effects are usually not the norm, and most frequently occur in a small percentage of people who take the drug. Out of every ten people who take penicillin, one is likely to have a very different, difficult, and perhaps dangerous reaction. We would not attribute their variation in drug reaction to their character, their childhood, or the neighborhood in which they were raised. We would not assume they lack willpower or have low moral character, nor would we assume them to be psychologically troubled. Instead, we would link their allergic reaction to a difference in the way their body metabolized the drug. We would see their issue as physiological, not psychological, or a trait of their personality.

The same basic principle holds true for those who become addicted. They use the same drugs that the majority of Americans use, but they have a different physiological reaction. They experience a side effect. In the case of drugs like alcohol, opiates, and cocaine that side effect *can* be addiction. For those who have this abnormal response to these drugs the effect is powerful. So powerful, in terms of their brain reaction that in some cases, an addictive adaptation begins almost immediately.

A Case Example

A high school athlete in my home town was injured during a football game. He was taken to the emergency room for treatment which included a dose of an opiate painkiller and a prescription for five pills to take home. He had never drank alcohol or taken any addictive drug up to this time in his life. He reported waking up the next morning with his first thought being “I get to take another pill”, not for the pain, but for the euphoria he had experienced the night before. Within months he was buying Oxycontin off the street to satisfy a very progressed addiction to opiates.

This case example illustrates the difference that some people experience when they take an addictive drug. The majority of people would not share his experience because the drug would not cause the chemicals in their brain to react in this manner. However, sometimes the brain experiences this powerful “WOW!” and its natural reaction is to want more. As the brain gets more of the drug it begins a process of adaptation that will steal one of our most precious abilities, our ability to “choose”. The brain and the drug will collude to deny the person the power of choice, reason, sound decision-making, and will eventually dismantle the person’s character, leaving one with a brain adapted to denial, dishonesty, manipulation, selfishness, and self-centeredness.

Fact 3: Addiction is a disease.

Yes, addiction is a disease. It is a complicated disease which begins with a simple yet profound brain chemical experience that ensures a descent into a multitude of social, financial, psychological, legal, and medical problems, all while the hostage mind is telling the sick person they are not sick (denial).