

The Addictive Personality

Susan Peabody

I have been a creature of habit all my life. If I like a certain kind of food I eat it every day. If I like a movie I watch it over and over again. This led to one addiction after another: sugar, overeating, shopping, drinking, and love. I finally got my addictions under control with the help of support groups. Today, I love variety as much as anyone and all my bad habits are under control.

I have thought a lot about what led to my obsession to do the same things over and over again and have come to the following conclusions.

The Freudians use the term “repetition compulsion” to describe the mind’s tendency to repeat traumatic events in order to deal with them. Another Freudian term, the “pleasure principle,” describes the need of the infant to seek gratification over and over again. In adults, this would be called the “production of pleasure.”

So what happens when we combine these concepts, and what shall we call this phenomenon? Well, for lack of a better term, I call it the “pleasure compulsion,” or “addictive personality.” It is the tendency to repeat the same pleasurable experience over and over again in an attempt to control pleasure and pain.

It is the addictive personality, and the attempt to ameliorate our sorrows, that turns us into addicts. If you hang around addicts long enough you will hear them talk about how their addiction started when they “used” to manage their painful emotions. “My mother didn’t love me very much and I turned to food,” says the compulsive overeater. “I didn’t make the football team in high school, and I kept going out and getting drunk,” says the alcoholic.

Most people who seek pleasure to dissipate anything from sadness to boredom will move on to other mood-altering experiences—they like variety. Others, however, like routine and the routine gets out of control. Take the child who is rebuffed by her classmates and eats a cookie to comfort herself. The next morning she wakes up and remembers the pain. She could do a variety of things to distract herself from the sadness (or shame), but for some reason this child remembers how good the cookie tasted and she makes her way to the kitchen. Trauma, pleasure, and repetition become locked. Not just trauma and pleasure; that would not lead to addiction. It is the repetition factor that can change this child's life forever.

The addictive personality may be linked to the desire for control. There is no trial and error necessary when you are doing something for the second or third time. Whatever worked before is guaranteed to work again—or so we think. Unfortunately, many mood-altering experiences become a magnet for problems. Food lovers get overweight. Heavy drinkers get DUIs. Gamblers lose their pay checks. Then there is the increased tolerance phenomenon. It takes more and more of the experience to get the desired affects—more food, more alcohol, more trips to Reno. This is the nightmare of addiction. The mood-altering experience becomes a problem, but you are hooked.

So why do some people comfort themselves with a variety of experiences and others get locked into a routine of reenacting one or two mood-altering experiences? Can there be a physiological explanation? Many people think so. In his book "Emotional Intelligence," Daniel Goleman discusses at length the relationship between the brain and the addictive personality. It's all in the amygdala he explains.

Why is it helpful to understand the addictive personality? Well, for one thing, it helps explain why the drug addict, long after he has gone through a physical withdrawal, has a relapse. This is discussed in Craig Nakken's book, "The Addictive Personality: Roots, Rituals and Recovery."

It also makes clear that addicts, with their predisposition for routine, are well advised to substitute a healthy routine for a new one. This is why 12-Step programs are so successful. They replace their negative routines with positive ones. Take my case, for example. I was in therapy for years to analyze why I was an alcoholic and food addict, but because of my addictive personality I couldn't stop acting out. Then I got into the routine of going to 12-Step meetings, socializing with my new 12-Step friends, and working the 12 steps (self-improvement). Before I knew it, my self-destructive habits had disappeared. I had replaced bad habits with good habits.

I see people with the addictive personality grouped into two camps. First of all, there are the addicts who have abused a mood altering experience and can never engage in it again. Bill Wilson puts it this way in the book *Alcoholics Anonymous*: "Physicians who are familiar with alcoholism agree there is no such thing as making a normal drinker out of an alcoholic. Science may one day accomplish this, but it hasn't done so yet."

Then there are those addicts who can successfully fight the addictive personality and engage in a little of everything without getting hooked on anything in particular. This would apply to food addicts.

This is where the battle lines are drawn in the world of substance-abuse treatment. There are those who believe you can train yourself to fight the addictive personality through moderation, and then there are those who believe you can never engage in certain mood-altering experiences without risking relapse. Even some 12-Step programs are divided on this issue. In *Alcoholics Anonymous* any alcohol consumption at all is a relapse, while in *Overeaters Anonymous* people believe you may have to give up certain "trigger" foods forever, but when it comes to food in general you continue to eat in moderation..

I won't take sides on this issue of abstinence versus moderation except to say "different strokes

for different folks.” We each, through trial and error, must find the treatment program that works for us. However, whatever form of treatment an addict seeks, he is well advised to admit he has an addictive personality. Remember: “To know oneself makes for power, self-control and success.”

Of course recognizing the underlying issues of obsession like the addictive personality is not enough to get your life under control. You still have to change how you think and behave. And you have to change what you value and put recovery ahead of trying to soothe anxiety with repetition. But that is another article. I just know that information jumps starts the changes we need to make in ourselves. At least this is true in my recovery. This is why I write