
The Role of Discipline and Self-Control in Addiction Recovery

Like a city whose walls are broken down is a man who lacks self-control.

Proverbs 25:28

WHAT IS THE ROLE OF DISCIPLINE AND SELF-CONTROL in addiction recovery? This is a hotly debated question and depending on who you ask you will undoubtedly get a different response. There are those that believe that a person can overcome addiction simply by exercising willpower and self-control, a "pull yourself up by your own bootstraps" approach to recovery. There are some, and we'll explore that view first, that argue addiction is an overpowering disease that completely destroys human will and self-control. In other words, a person is literally powerless to change. I believe that both of these views are incorrect and in this paper I offer a different view.

The modern view of addiction recovery suggests that powerful human quality like discipline and self-control have limited or absolutely no value in recovery. This is based on the idea that addiction is an overpowering, chronic illness that causes continued addiction and results in involuntary behavior like drinking excessively, abusing drugs, or chain smoking. This view is expressed by Denise Biron writing for *Regents School of Psychology Faith and Counseling Program*.¹

What people often underestimate is the complexity of addiction—that it is a disease that impacts the brain and because of that, stopping addictive behavior is not simply a matter of willpower. (Biron, 2008)

Her view, and those who believe similarly, is based on the idea that the brain has changed to the extent that powerful human qualities like willpower, self-control, and perseverance are no longer possible.

¹ Biron, Denise, Dr. 2008. *Addiction Takes Many Forms*. Regent University, School of Psychology and Counseling. Retrieved July 15, 2011 from http://www.regent.edu/acad/schcou/faithandtherapy/archives/download/FaithandTherapy_March_08.pdf.

In churches countless members have been told if their faith or willpower were strong enough their addiction could be overcome. (Biron, 2008)

Unfortunately, this view teaches those struggling with addiction that no matter how "hard" they try to control their drinking or drug use, they simply cannot stop being an addict because they have a chronic illness that is impossible to fully overcome. In other words, they are helpless victims who have lost complete control of their lives, which is why some programs require attendees to stand-up in front of an audience and declare, "I am powerless...."

What is worse, she completely dismisses the role of "faith" in overcoming addiction even though the program she represents has the word "faith" in the title! The emphasis of the program is clearly "counseling" rather than "faith" because Biron believes that addiction is a mountain that cannot be moved by the kind of faith Jesus described in Matthew 17:20, *"I tell you the truth, if you had faith even as small as a mustard seed, you could say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it would move. Nothing would be impossible."*

This is terribly unfortunate. Instead of encouraging those struggling with addiction to dig deep and overcome their destructive behavior, they are encouraged to remain an addict by "well-meaning" but misguided people like Denise Biron. She promotes powerlessness and hopelessness and discourages personal responsibility. The emphasis is on the power of the substance rather than the power of the individual to overcome. Therefore, meaningful change cannot occur because the individual struggling with his or her addiction gives up trying and every setback, no matter how big or small, will be further evidence that success is impossible. In a sense, life-long addiction becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy for the drug user.

If you believe that you cannot accomplish something -- regardless of how hard you try -- you will not be successful. This point was made by Jeff Schaler, Ph.D. in his Book, "Addiction is a Choice:"

It is ironic that ideologues of 'involuntary addiction' make it more difficult to help such people. They do this preaching that addiction to the practice of consuming a chemical substance, such as alcohol or cocaine, is a disease. Their first job, they believe, is to convince 'addicts' that they are sick, and therefore not responsible for their actions. In my judgment, this is just about the worst thing we could possibly tell such people. To someone engaged in a bitter struggle to give up one way of life and find a replacement, it is discouraging and demoralizing to be informed that their old way of life is somehow fated, predetermined by their body chemistry. It's also untrue. I always advise such individuals that they can control themselves and their lives, that they have the power to renounce an old addiction, if they really want to. This, I believe, is helpful to them. It's also the truth.

Schaler Ph.D, 2009

Schaler is correct in several respects. However, he completely dismisses that role and importance of Christian faith and values in addiction recovery and proposes a "rational approach" to recovery.

Unfortunately, addiction is by definition irrational and overcoming addiction is not simply a matter of changing our thoughts and habits. Yes, it is true that willpower and self-control are powerful human qualities, but they cannot be exercised in any meaningful way apart from God's grace. They are the result of a spirit-filled life and occur after one is born-again. Prior to God's intervention, we are powerless -- dead in our sins. Once God has moved in our life and called us from darkness, we have been set free from sin and can now live a new life in Christ. Keep in mind, that this spiritual rebirth must come first. Overcoming addiction is not simply a matter of pulling oneself up by his or her bootstraps. That simply does not work. Thanks to God, however, because we have been set free from sin and now live in freedom:

For or we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body ruled by sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin. (Romans 6:6)

We "should no longer be slaves to sin" according to Paul. However, some Christians still do. Why? They do not believe that they are truly free! God has set them free from sin but they have not yet embraced that freedom and still believe that the lie that they are powerless.

I do not want to minimize the powerful effects of drugs and alcohol in a person's life or suggest that overcoming will be easy simply because one is born again. Living the new life secured through faith requires great effort and commitment and is built on faith. Those in Christ must recognize all things (not "some" things) are possible through the Spirit's strengthening according to God's divine will:

I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me. (Philippians 4:13)

Meditate on this verse. Fighting sin that offers short-term relief and pleasure from pain and suffering will take work and commitment. When you face times of trial, recite the above Scripture and believe that Christ will strengthen you and give you the ability to endure. You are not alone or helpless. The power of God is living inside of you!

Dealing with addiction will be a daily battle -- at least in the short term -- so you will need to rejoice in those small victories. Urges, desires, and impulses are a natural part of being human. The Bible refers to this as the sin nature and teaches that every human being is born with this nature. Understanding this central Christian doctrine explains why we make choices that are self-destructive and harmful:

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. (Romans 7:18, 19)

Everyone struggling with addiction can attest to the truthfulness of the apostle's words above. Despite good intentions and a strong desire to quit, the urge to drink or use drugs may seem overpowering at times. Be encouraged to live by the Spirit of God daily so you do not yield to sinful desire:

Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God. Those who live according to the sinful nature have their minds set on what that nature desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires. (Romans 8:8, 5)

We may have a natural predisposition to sin, but this does not give us an excuse for living a sinful lifestyle. Obeying our sinful, natural desires leads to disobedience and eventually death. Living by the Spirit (the very essence of being born again), results in desires that line up with God's moral will.

As you live in the Spirit, you will discover the strength to subdue worldly passions that once dominated your old life. Your new, God-centered desires will produce changes in your attitude and behavior. God sent His Spirit into your life so you can overcome the sin nature and live according to His Word. God's help is necessary but your participation is required. You can exercise discipline and self-control through the strength God has given you through His Spirit. He does not control your life, but asks that you work with Him in the process of sanctification:

Your disposition changes as the Spirit of God works in you to lead you to greater holiness. Yes, you must strive for God's righteousness, but you will continue to war against impure, selfish desires of the flesh every step of the way. To keep from stumbling, you should focus continually on heavenly things that come from above:

Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. (Colossians 3:2, 3)

The key difference between Christianity and secular humanism is the understanding that man is a moral being. Proponents of a secular world view tell us that human beings are biological machines controlled by their physical nature and the environment in which they inhabit. We supposedly evolved from lower, less-evolved primates and we are therefore similar to chimps, monkeys, and apes in many respects. The 'enlightened' view of men and women, based on the notion that we are animals, is that we cannot control our natural desires through force of will. This philosophy is contrary to God's Word and an affront to our human sensibilities.

In order to live the life Christ promises, you must reject the politically correct nonsense that dominates modern science and psychology that most of us have been taught to believe. Begin to look at your life through a biblical perspective, which teaches that you are made in the very image of God. You have been given a moral will and powerful intellect to guide your choices and behavior. You are not controlled by your physical nature like an animal who acts on instinct. Additionally, when you were born again, your nature changed completely. At that time, you were liberated from the power of sin because you were crucified with Christ.

In speaking with Christians who struggle with addiction, many understand that God is working in their lives. Yet, they struggle with disbelief because they do not believe they can overcome this enemy through

the tools and abilities given to them by God. This is the source of despairing statements like, "I've tried, but I just can't quit."

When we lose hope, our faith waivers and we may give into failure rather than living in the freedom secured for us through Christ. We become like a wave tossed on the ocean:

But when you ask, you must believe and not doubt because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. (James 1:6)

Try not to give into despair by believing the propaganda of those who tell you that you cannot do it. You are a child of God and He has given you the power to live a life that is free from addiction. While it will not be easy, God has given you His Spirit precisely so that you can overcome. By walking in the Spirit, your life will bear the fruit God desires:

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires. (Galatians 5:22-24)

Self-control and discipline are natural by-products of a life filled with God's Spirit or as Paul put it, "fruit of the Spirit." As we live and breathe the Spirit of God in more fully, His fruit becomes more abundant as well. This is something that must mature over time and given the proper ground to harvest. You must be patient always keeping in mind that there is a war within every Christian that is waged between the Spirit of God and the natural man.

Yes, we have two natures that are mutually exclusive and the resulting struggle may be painful and difficult. Even though a difficult battle, ultimately there is victory in Christ:

But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. (1 Corinthians 15:57)

The Christian's victory over addiction is found in Christ and available to all who believe in God. It is because we have victory and are new creations born of the Spirit so that we are now able to live a holy life. Indeed, the Christian is capable of exercising self-control and certainly expected to do so as a child of God. This is a holy command of the Lord:

As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: "Be holy because I am holy." (1 Peter 1:14, 15)

We are commanded to be holy because we are God's children. You are no longer a slave to sin but a new creation in Christ. Submit to God's will and discipline your mind and body. Despite what the world tells

you, millions of people have walked away from addiction and now live a new life bearing testimony of God's grace. They have done it and so can you. Believe you can do it and control your natural impulses and urges – they are not your master!

His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires. (2 Peter 1:3, 4)

As Christians, we participate in God's divine nature. It is true! We are able to escape the corruption of this world because He has given us everything we require for life and godliness. The life we now live in Christ is one of freedom, but it requires that we exercise God-given self-control and discipline when we experience temptation.

You must also persevere. Stick with it and remember that God is with you every step of the way. You can do all things through Christ who strengthens you (Philippians 4:13) because you are a new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17). As you experience small victories over drugs and alcohol, your confidence will grow.

One last note, if you are involved in a recovery program that promotes the false belief that you cannot control your behavior, you need to explore an alternative approach immediately. Your current program facilitator or counselor may have good intentions, but telling you that you have a disease beyond your control is not helping you experience a full life free of addiction. This also applies to friends and family who may tell you that you are unable to overcome this foe apart from therapy, counseling, or committing your life to a recovery program of one sort or another.

Unfortunately, many faith-based recovery programs in the church also teach false doctrines about addiction. In so doing, they are encouraging continued bondage and suffering. Keep in mind that the truth is the only antidote for your situation. Focus on the truth because ultimately that is what will lead to recovery and freedom *"Then you will know the truth and the truth will set you free!"* (John 8:32).