

## What is Addiction?

The word “addiction” is derived from the Latin and literally means: “Giving over; surrender.” Those who have an addiction have given themselves over to a habit or practice that plays a dominant role in their life. An alcoholic may be consumed with thoughts of drinking, a prescription drug addict devotes considerable attention on his or her habit, a cigarette smoker anxiously looks forward to the next puff, and those with an eating disorder eat portions well in excess of what is needed for health and nutrition. For many, there is preoccupation with the object that they are addicted to or the behavior they are engaged in.

The popular view of addiction today is that it is a chronic disease, like arthritis or diabetes, which requires treatment and therapy to “manage.” According to this view, an addiction is something that a person has rather than something a person does. For example, drunkenness is merely a symptom of alcohol disease; much like labored breathing is a symptom of chronic asthma.

Throughout recorded human history, compulsive, personally destructive behavior, such as excessive drinking, was understood to be a moral failing. This was based on the belief that human beings were fundamentally moral beings – made in the image of God – and therefore responsible for their actions. Popular opinion about addiction began to shift significantly in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries as a result to the views and values expressed by influential proponents of *Enlightenment*.

According to the *Age of Enlightenment*, reason and science trumped faith and morality. The emphasis was on a purely natural explanation for the world. The idea that human beings were made in the image of God was rejected. Consequently, medical professionals began to examine human behavior through the prism of biology and naturalism as opposed to religious teachings. They classified behaviors as normal and abnormal and looked for physiological causes for destructive, personal behavior. They also believed that man evolved, like other animals, so human beings possessed an inherent, fundamental survival instinct and would not choose to do anything that was self-destructive. This led to the belief that addiction must be a disease because it was considered an abnormal behavior.

A good example is the material presented by the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) – an agency clearly guided by a secular, non-religious view of the world and human nature. The below summarizes the view of NIDA regarding addiction:<sup>1</sup>

*Addiction is a chronic disease similar to other chronic diseases such as type II diabetes, cancer, and cardiovascular disease. No one chooses to be a drug addict or to develop heart disease. (National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2011; emphasis added)*

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<sup>1</sup> <http://archives.drugabuse.gov/about/welcome/aboutdrugabuse/chronicdisease/>

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According to this view, addiction is not a personal choice but a disease. Those who smoke cigarettes, drink heavily, or overeat are not personally responsible for their behavior because they have a disorder that they cannot restrain because they have an illness.

The truth of the matter is that there is no scientific, medical, or other hard evidence to support the disease myth. This point was made by Jack Trimpey in his book *"Rational Recovery: The New Cure for Substance Addiction."* Trimpey stated that there is not a single shred of evidence that addiction is a disease resulting in uncontrollable drinking or drug use (Trimpey, 1996).

*"Every major tenet of the 'disease' view of addiction is refuted by both scientific research and everyday observation."<sup>2</sup>*

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The myth that addiction is a disease has serious implications because it separates people from their addiction. If it is true that addiction is a disease, then it is not a moral problem and personal responsibility, willpower, and self-control have no place in recovery. This is precisely what we are asked to believe by many addiction recovery practitioners and clinicians. Since ideas matter, it is important to correct this false belief so we can actually assist those who have an addiction by telling them the truth.

Let me explain why addiction is not a disease or an illness. A disease is something that you have while addiction is something that you do. This is not a minor distinction, but the major difference that separates human behavior from a medical condition. A person has cancer, but an addict does a particular thing. Drinking alcohol in excess, binge eating, and injecting heroin are activities that one performs. Behaviors are not diseases, but voluntary actions of free-will human beings.

In *"Addiction is a Choice"* (2009), Schaler argued that addiction is, by definition, a voluntary action that stems from a person's free will. His conclusion makes complete sense. Drinking alcohol excessively, taking narcotics to get high, watching pornography, gambling, and smoking marijuana are choices people make. Alcohol is a 'thing' that is acted upon.

While addiction is clearly a choice, there are undoubtedly reasons why a person chooses to abuse drugs or alcohol. However, a reason is not a justification. As moral beings, we are responsible for our choices and resulting behavior and those behaviors and choices that result in terrible consequences are considered a moral failing.

This assessment causes us to feel uncomfortable. We don't like to think of addiction terms of "right" and "wrong." Since addiction often involves self-destructive behavior that results in terrible physical and emotional pain, some argue that it cannot be a choice. This too is incorrect. We are free-will moral beings. Our inherent capacity to choose also means that we can choose to do things that are self-destructive. We can either choose to do the morally sensible thing or continue to live in sin.

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<sup>2</sup> "The Truth about Addiction and Recovery." Taken from <http://lifeprocessprogram.com/the-truth-about-addiction-and-recovery-why-it-doesnt-make-sense-to-call-addiction-a-disease/>

It is important to recognize and understand that our personal choices have consequences. If we continue to willfully participate in sinful behavior, we must recognize that there will be terrible consequences associated with that choice. This is the inconvenient truth about freedom of choice and perhaps the reason for Paul's comments to the Galatians:

*The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction... (Galatians 6:8a)*

People who chain-smoke cigarettes, abuse prescription medications, or eat excessively are personally responsible for their choices. It is for this reason that we are continually looking for an excuse for our behavior. We are a society of "victims" who do terrible things because of some external agent – like an "addiction disease." We are great at making excuses but find it difficult to take responsibility.

This is not a new phenomenon and has its roots in the beginning of humanity according to the Judeo-Christian view of humanity. Consider the sin of Adam and Eve as recorded in Genesis Chapter Three. After Adam sinned in the garden paradise of Eden, he was asked by God why he disobeyed His divine commandment. Adam offered this excuse for his actions:

*The man said, "The woman you put here with me—she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it." (Genesis 3:12)*

Rather than taking responsibility for his disobedience, Adam blamed God for putting the woman in the garden. Not only did he blame God, an impudent accusation, he also accused the woman because she gave him the fruit to eat. Of course, Adam undoubtedly fingered the serpent as well. It would appear that Adam believed that he was the only one who was not responsible for his own sinful behavior.

From scripture, we know that neither God nor the woman were responsible for Adam's actions. God did not cause Adam to sin because He placed the tree in the Garden and Eve did not force Adam to take a bite of the fruit. True, she gave it to him, but he lifted it to his mouth and took a bite because he wanted to. Adam made a free will choice and he was responsible before God who judged his immoral behavior justly. He suffered the consequences for his actions because he was a moral being.

The recent 'sexcapades' of former New York Senator Anthony Weiner is a vivid example of deflecting responsibility for sin by blaming the addiction "disease." Various photos surfaced on the internet from women who had received inappropriate images of Senator Weiner's crotch area on their phones and in their email inboxes. Naturally, the Senator denied any involvement but when the photos were traced directly to his email address, he finally admitted that he was responsible for sending the photos and messages.

Almost immediately Senator Weiner claimed that he had a disease and checked into therapy for treatment. Apparently sexting is now a disease that forces people, like Anthony Weiner, to commit

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irresponsible, lewd, acts of depravity. Weiner is not alone. This is a natural result of embracing the disease myth of addiction.

What we cannot tell Anthony Weiner and others like him is that his behavior is immoral because calling addiction a sin strikes at our modern sensibilities and many people find this diagnosis unsympathetic and unkind. We have been conditioned to minimize sinful behavior or excuse it altogether because it makes us uncomfortable. Thus, we have constructed clever ways of masking the problem, like calling addiction a disease, disorder, or inherited trait. Unfortunately, failure to identify the true source of the problem will not bring about freedom. By claiming that addiction is something other than sin will only lead to frustration, despair, and continued bondage for those who are addicted.

The reality is that addiction is a sinful, personal choice. It is not only personally destructive, but it also impacts others who are close to the problem. It rips apart families and causes extraordinary pain in communities struggling to deal with drug related crime and poverty. Until we recognize that addiction is a personal choice, it will continue to spread without restraint. It will also create a society of victims who are hoping to excuse their sinful behavior.

Although somewhat difficult to swallow, I am convinced that most people understand that addiction is a choice; at least on some level. It is quite obvious that alcohol cannot not pour itself into a glass and into a person's mouth unassisted. Alcoholics pour the alcohol into a glass, lift it to their mouths, open their lips, and take a drink. These are voluntary behaviors performed by free-will moral beings. Therefore, they are choices and the one engaged in these activities is ultimately responsible for the consequences that naturally follow.

Christianity explains that human beings are moral agents created by God. Objects don't control our behavior – we do. Human behavior is a product of our moral will and personal desires. The choices we make can either be wise or foolish. This is the dilemma of possessing a free will and addiction is an unfortunate illustration of that fact. Fortunately, choosing to quit is also an example of our free will and something that is available to everyone who is struggling with addiction. You can choose to change your life today!