



Hooked

The Nature of Addiction

by Mary Barlow

Learn how addictions start, and how they can be overcome.

Rita described herself as a “quiet alcoholic.” At first, she drank just like her father did—only at night without ever getting into trouble. Then, she started drinking a little earlier in the day and continuing on a little later into the evening. Her children never saw her drink, but one afternoon as she looked out the picture window and watched them get off the school bus, she had a strong urge to drink. So she began filling plastic “sippie” cups with wine, hiding them, and sneaking drinks whenever she could.

Like about 17.6 million other American adults, Rita is addicted to alcohol. The National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) defines addiction as “a chronic relapsing brain disease that is characterized by compulsive drug seeking and use, despite harmful consequences.”

Those concerned about the use of a substance or activity should consider how it’s impacting their life. Is the use of any substance or activity—whether it’s alcohol, drugs, nicotine, food,

gambling, sex, even the Internet—causing difficulty either:

- Financially,
- Legally,
- Socially (relationships),
- Physically (health), and/or
- Emotionally (thinking and feeling)?

If so, it's time to get help.

In the beginning

According to the NIDA, the risk of addiction is influenced by environment, culture, and brain function. For example:

- Since 31 percent of college students abuse alcohol, it's thought that they're at a higher risk for alcohol addiction.
- Drinking as part of family traditions can also put people at a higher risk for addiction.
- The way certain substances affect the brain can make it difficult to stop using them.

What happens in the brain

Neuroscientists are now understanding more about how substances and activities affect the brain. The use of cocaine, whiskey, nicotine, chocolate, slot machines, etc. are sensed in the "limbic system" of the brain, commonly referred to as the "reward circuitry." Normally, this is where we feel pleasure when engaging in activities linked with survival, such as eating or having sex. Associating these activities with pleasure (by releasing the brain chemical dopamine) is the brain's way of ensuring we'll do them again. And again.

However, like a con artist, addictive substances fool the brain into thinking they're needed for survival, too. When exposed to certain substances, the brain releases larger than normal amounts of dopamine—sometimes two to 10 times more. So, to the substance-troubled person, the brain thinks it "needs" the ecstasy, gin, or excessive time online. It's no wonder that many people who overcome addictions describe their recovery as "freedom."

To complicate matters, "the way your body handles (substances of abuse) may

be different than the way others do," says John Femino, M.D., founder of Meadows Edge Recovery Center in North Kingstown, Rhode Island. "Normally, the reward circuitry has an on, off, and ahhhh signal, and these signals are talking to each other." He explains that normally, the "off" signal will kick in as a result of a person's knowledge of possible negative consequences. For example, most people might think, "I'd like to eat an extra large serving of this deep, dark chocolate ice cream, but if I do, I could get sick, and probably gain weight." However, some people are more prone than others

According to the NIDA, substance abuse accounts for:

- More than 50 percent of violent crimes
- 60 to 80 percent of child abuse and neglect cases
- 50 to 70 percent of theft and property crimes

to continue the behavior, despite their knowledge of what could go wrong.

Regardless of how addiction begins, substance-troubled persons have a responsibility to get help. Substance abuse can increase the risk of serious accidents, cause long-term damage to brain function and other aspects of health, devastate the lives of families and children, and deplete personal finances.

In short, it can ruin your life.



How to break free

If you need help to overcome an addiction, you're not alone. In fact, your chances of succeeding are greater if you seek professional help and support. The first step, however, is to make the decision to stop. Then find help—a person, treatment center, organization, or support group. (See "Resources for Recovery" below.) Treatment should be customized for each individual, but among other measures, you will likely need to:

- Stop using the substance or activity
- Find healthy ways to manage stress
- Spend time in different locations
- And sometimes, change relationships so you're spending time with people who don't use the substance or activity

Please keep in mind that many people try to quit several times before succeeding. That's why it's important to **never give up in your efforts to recover.**

With the help of Alcoholics Anonymous, Rita has been sober for nearly 18 years. She went on to get a master's degree in spiritual counseling, and today, she helps others overcome their addictions. You can read more about Rita's struggle with addiction and recovery, as well as the recoveries of others, by visiting the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Voices for Recovery Web site at recoverymonth.gov/2007. ■

Resources for Recovery

If a substance or activity is negatively impacting your life, here are some resources to help you recover:

Alcoholics Anonymous
alcoholics-anonymous.org

National Council on Problem Gambling
ncpgambling.org/resources

Smokefree.gov
smokefree.gov

The National Institute on Drug Abuse
nida.nih.gov

RI Council on Alcoholism and Other Drug Dependence
ricaodd.org
1-866-ALC-DRUG

Narcotics Anonymous
na.org

Overeaters Anonymous
oa.org

Sex Addicts Anonymous
saa-recovery.org