

Could You Be Addicted?

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Today, many people are addicted in some way or another. Whether some addictions may be more dangerous or less dangerous to our well-being, every kind of addiction seriously harms life to one degree or another.

Unfortunately, addicted people usually deny their addiction; denial is a part of the addiction process.

When you think of addictions, you probably think first of addiction to alcohol (alcoholism) and to other substances such as cocaine, nicotine and food. But people can become addicted not only to substances but also to behaviors of the mind, emotions and body. In either case addicted persons lose control over a substance or behavior and are powerless to free themselves. They are enslaved. This is what it means to be addicted.

Addictions are contrary to God's will for us. Addictions to substances and wrong behaviors dishonor God and dangerously hurt us and other people. Christians can and do lose control over substances and behaviors just as non-Christians do. We continue to struggle with sin even though we are forgiven and renewed through our faith in Jesus, who made good for our sins by His death on the cross. The writer to the Hebrews tells us that the very nature of sin is to entangle us. He encourages, "Let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles" (Heb. 12:1).

Among the substances to which we can become addicted are alcohol, cocaine, heroine, nicotine, caffeine, marijuana, amphetamines and food. Some behaviors to which we become addicted have to do with work, sex, internet use, gambling, other addicted persons, and even criminal habits. In his letter to the Galatians, St. Paul identifies a number of behaviors to which we can become addicted: "sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery, idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like" (Gal. 5:19-20).

Christ-centered recovery

When people experience more pain than perceived benefit from their addictions, they often come to acknowledge them and seek help. They try to recover from addictions in many ways. One successful way of recovery for many has been the Twelve Step Program. This program was formulated for Alcoholics Anonymous in the 1930s and is used today by a variety of mutual help groups to deal with all sorts of addictions.

The Twelve Step Program contains many Biblical truths, but it is not Christ centered. It speaks of God in generic terms as a “power greater than ourselves” and as “God as we *understand him*” (italics added). Persons who want to recover by following the Twelve Steps need to put Christ into the steps in order to obtain the fullness of God’s resources for recovery. For example, we can revise the first three and most critical steps to direct us to: (1) admit our powerlessness over our addiction and realize how disobedient to God our lives have become and how hurtful to us and others; (2) believe that God, the Father of our Lord, Jesus Christ, can liberate us from our enslavement; and (3) turn our will and our lives over to the care of God through faith in His Son, Jesus, who, by His death to pay the debt of our sins, has obtained for us the forgiveness of sins, a right relationship with God, and a new life through the Holy Spirit.

In my book *When Addictions Threaten* (Concordia Publishing House, 2000), I offer the following Christian revision of each of the Twelve Steps:

Because God has endowed us with repentance to know and confess our sins and to trust in Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins and renewal of life, we are able to:

- 1) Admit that we are sinners as well as forgiven and renewed people. We daily sin much and often find ourselves powerless over facets of our lives that are not under control of the Holy Spirit and that dishonor God and hurt us and others.
- 2) Believe that God can and does daily forgive our sins for Jesus’ sake and liberate and renew our lives through the work of the Holy Spirit.
- 3) Live daily under the Holy Spirit’s power and, in the promise and new life of Holy Baptism, daily turn our will and our lives over to the care of God and His recreating power and make fuller use of His gift of the Holy Spirit for the renewal of facets of our lives that need transformation.
- 4) Make a searching and fearless inventory of our sinful behaviors that require immediate attention.
- 5) Admit to ourselves, to God, and at least one other Christian the exact nature of our sins. Mindful of the comforting and reassuring benefits of individual absolution, we value the privilege of making private confession before the pastor and receiving holy absolution from God through him.
- 6) Be ready to have God remove our sinful behavior.
- 7) Humbly ask Him to remove our sinful behavior.
- 8) Make a list of all persons we have harmed, and be willing to make amends to them all.
- 9) Make direct amends to such persons whenever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.
- 10) Continue day by day to take a personal inventory, and when we sin, receive God’s forgiveness and life-renewing power, and respond in responsible Christian ways.

- 11) Use God's Word and the Lord's Supper to enrich our relationship with God, as well as use God's Word and prayer to discover a clearer understanding of God's will that the Holy Spirit enables us to carry out.
- 12) Carry the message of the saving and freeing Gospel of Jesus Christ to people who need God's life-transforming resources to deal with a variety of concerns and, finally, to seek to express our growing Christian maturity in all aspects of life.

To recover from addictions, you and others can use Christian truths such as these. You might choose to use them in association with participation in a Twelve Step mutual-help group. Such groups deal with addictions to alcohol, a variety of other drugs, food, sex, work, gambling and more.

A family matter

It is imperative that those emotionally close to an addicted person participate in his or her recovery efforts.

Family members and those in a close relationship with an addicted person also suffer from an addiction, including being addicted to an addicted person—called “codependence.” In her book *Codependent No More: How to Stop Controlling Others and Start Caring for Yourself*, Melody Beattie describes the codependent as a person who lets another person's addictive behavior harmfully affect him or her and who is obsessed with controlling the behavior of other people.

Christians can and do recover from addictions. Jesus is our freedom-giving Savior and Lord. He affirmed this when He said, “I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin... If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed” (John 8:34-36).

Could you be addicted? Jesus can set you free. Could someone close to you be addicted? Jesus can free that person, too. There is hope and help for addicted persons.

(For more information about addictions and God's help, consult the author's trilogy of addiction books published by Concordia Publishing House: *The Twelve Steps — The Church's Challenge and Opportunity*, *When Addictions Threaten*, and *Freedom from Hurtful Behaviors*. —Ed.)

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