

Biological Factors and Addiction

Because many people may have opinions as to whether chemical dependency and other addictions are a disease, or are interested in biological factors in general, it is important to briefly address this area. When I wrote *Healing the Addictive Mind*, more than fifteen years ago, there was increasing controversy as to what constitutes a disease, and if addiction was one. The debate has somewhat subsided as we appear closer to identifying a genetic predisposition to many diseases. I am of the opinion, as are many in the field, that in the future there will be a gene identified that plays a key role in addiction, and perhaps contributes to an Addictive Personality. However, I do not lose sight of the fact that this really would not change the need to understand and heal the emotional, cognitive, and spiritual aspects of addiction. Thus, it is my purpose to provide a broader perspective as to the origin, progression, and healing from all addictive behaviors and lifestyles.

When it comes to the subject matter of this book, I look at the word disease and see a word that describes the present state of “disease” of the majority of human beings. I believe that the root of this disease is our Addictive Personality. Many people have approached addiction from the outside in: describing the behavior and then trying to stop it. I suggest a reversal to this approach and to view addiction from the inside out: identifying and then changing the thoughts and beliefs that led us into the addictive experience and lifestyle.

While researching this book, I read extensively on the biological basis of addiction, including brain chemistry. I am fascinated with this subject and feel the field holds tremendous promise. However, although I think there is much to be learned, as well as many applications of biologically based approaches, my work is focused on shifting our perception of ourselves and the world. I think of my work as the emotional, cognitive, and spiritual thread that can create healing regardless of biology.

As with any approach, there are pros and cons. I feel that the disease concept, brain research, and possible genetic predisposition for addiction are all useful, regardless of future confirmation or rejection of the scientific validity, because a key to healing is reducing guilt and shame. In early healing, the disease concept allows the individual and family to let go of some blame, condemnation, judgment, and guilt. If saying a person’s addiction is a disease or is biologically based allows that individual to look within and say, “I have a choice now as to how to live my life,” then I am all for it. Conversely, I have seen many people with addiction problems avoid taking responsibility for their actions and life by blaming all on having a disease they can’t do anything about. Therefore, I put less emphasis in my work on the biological aspects of addiction, and more on how to create choice and growth. This is not dismissive of biological approaches, but rather is reflective of what I believe is my best contribution. If, at a minimum, I can assist you in being able to say “I know more about addiction, and happiness, and I have a choice as to how to live my life,” I will be satisfied. What I hope for is that this material will introduce positive choice into a life where there has been much suffering.

Is There Really an Addictive Personality?

I realize I may have written a book on healing something that some people will argue does not exist. There is evidence on both sides of the argument, including: there is no

addictive personality; the traits associated with addiction are the result of becoming addicted to something; and an addictive personality not only exists, but is the cause of most addictions. To further complicate matters, there is much evidence to support how cultural values, social values, situational factors, emotional and cognitive bias, psychological factors, biological factors, and developmental variations all contribute to addiction.

I believe there is an Addictive Personality within each and every one of us. It is part of being human. Because each of us has the propensity (to greater or lesser degree) to make the mistake of adopting certain beliefs and traits that lead us into some avoidance of suffering and pain, most of us, at some time in our lives, look outside of ourselves for happiness. There are some who tend to do this much more than others. For our purposes, think of the Addictive Personality not as something you either have or don't have, but rather as a continuum. This is similar to my view on health in general. The question is not whether we are healthy or unhealthy, but rather where we are on the continuum. Thus we need not waste time deciding if we do or don't have an Addictive Personality. This approach puts the emphasis on recognizing how the belief system of the Addictive Personality keeps us, to varying degrees, from having the full and rich life we want and can claim.

We are all prone to addiction, individually and culturally, yet some of us are more prone than others. The value of my approach is in seeing that healing is not just stopping an addiction, even though this is obviously important. Healing is really about coming to see how the thought system of the Addictive Personality affects our life, and doing the work to adopt another way of being in the world. We, individually and as a culture, need to address not only our specific addictions and addictive lifestyle, but we need to heal the roots of the addictive quest that are within us.

How to Use the Power of Choice to Heal

Although the Addictive Personality will try and convince us that following its lead offers us a multitude of choices, all of the choices it offers have one thing in common: The Four A's. The choices are always some form of what you want to achieve, acquire, accomplish, or seek approval for. Thus, the Addictive Personality actually only offers us choices on how to further deceive ourselves.

In my work, as well as in my general outlook on life, I have tried to take a road different from the one to which we are directed by the Addictive Personality and the Four A's. This is not always easy, as our culture is largely supportive of these "choices" because they often bear the trappings of success. For example, most of us were given assignments in school with such instructions as "compare and contrast," or "give a critical analysis." While these skills can have value, their overuse reveals only a partial and limited picture. When we try to analyze or compartmentalize someone or something, we miss their true nature. A common mistake when we approach growth, change, or new experiences is that we try to make a square peg fit into a round hole. To make it fit, we must cut off the corners. Unfortunately we do this with ourselves and the people in our lives. In contrast, when we see commonalities and similarities between ourselves and others, even though they are sometimes painful, we feel more love and connectedness.