

CHANNELING THE POWER OF ADDICTION

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We may joke about addiction (“He’s totally addicted to football.” “I’m addicted to coffee!”) but true addiction has ruined countless lives, marriages and families.

To understand genuine and dangerous addiction, we need to understand how the brain works, particularly what’s called the basal ganglia and the “reward circuit”.



WHILE SOME TRAITS CERTAINLY CAN MAKE
A PERSON MORE SUSCEPTIBLE TO DEVELOPING
A DRUG ADDICTION, OTHERS CAN BE LEVERAGED
TO EXCEL IN A HEALTHY DAILY LIFE.



UNDERSTANDING ADDICTION:

THE BASICS

The basal ganglia make up a part of the brain that's **responsible for feelings such as motivation and pleasure** and are involved —no surprise here—in habit formation.

OUR BRAIN'S REWARD CIRCUIT IS LOCATED HERE AND WHEN DRUGS (OR OTHER ADDICTIVE SUBSTANCES SUCH AS ALCOHOL) ARE ABUSED, THE USER IS EFFECTIVELY OVER-ACTIVATING THE REWARD PATH.

The drug leads the body to associate that substance with euphoria or extreme pleasure and **reduces the user's judgement and ability to experience rewards naturally** through other means such as exercise, intimacy, or laughter.

Substance abuse is considered a brain-related disease because it leads to changes in the reward circuit and

negatively influences someone's ability to manage stress and engage in self-control. **Eventually, a user will need the drug to experience any pleasure at all or, even worse, to feel "normal".**

Our brain is constantly sending and receiving signals. It naturally creates a transmitter called **dopamine** which acts as a messenger, signaling pleasure, reward, and motivation.

IN OTHER WORDS, DOPAMINE CAN TELL THE BRAIN THAT A EUPHORIC FEELING IS CONNECTED TO THE USE OF A SPECIFIC DRUG SO WHEN SOMEONE HAS AN ADDICTION, THEIR BRAIN IS OVERSTIMULATED AND NATURAL COMMUNICATION IS DISRUPTED.



WHAT INFLUENCES ADDICTION?

It seems that there's **no such thing as an "addictive personality"**. But studies have identified several common factors and traits that can increase people's chances of developing an addiction. These include **a lack of tolerance for stress, poor coping skills, social isolation, impulsivity, and a desire to seek excitement.**

Exposure to stressful environments and trauma are, of course, big contributors to addiction. And when people are surrounded by others who engage in addictive behaviors and create pressure to participate, there's a heightened

risk of developing an addiction. Generally, turning to drugs can indicate a need to feel more powerful, self-confident, or energized.

The upside of impulsivity is excitement and spontaneity, **but it can also lead to negative consequences such as rash decisions.** If by nature you're a sensation seeker or a risk taker who tends to be adventurous, be careful. You may also be more likely to try substances and become addicted.

BUT WHAT IF SOME OF THOSE ADDICTIVE TRAITS COULD BE REPURPOSED TO CREATE A HEALTHY LIFE AFTER ADDICTION?





THE BEST STRATEGY IS TO SURROUND OURSELVES WITH OTHERS WHO SHARE HEALTHY OUTLETS FOR STRESS, SUCH AS EXERCISING, WHICH, IN A GROUP SETTING CAN ALSO ALLEVIATE FEELINGS OF ISOLATION.



FROM ADDICTION TO HEALTHY LIVING

Just as addiction and personalities are complex, so is the return to healthy living.

A GOOD START IS TO IDENTIFY WAYS TO REINSTATE NATURAL REWARDS THROUGH POSITIVE EXPERIENCES.

Setting yourself up for a healthier lifestyle can help to diminish the need for the drug. Being spontaneous and a risk-taker may have previously led to harmful behaviors, but perhaps that spontaneity can be re-channeled to start new hobbies and experiment with healthy ways to reach a "natural high." Exercise can lead to the release

of several hormones, including dopamine, that will make us feel good and motivate us to keep going. **Physical activities can allow our brains to experience natural pleasure and rewards.**

Joining a local adult hockey league, reaching new personal goals records in weightlifting or cycling or even striving to complete a marathon can lead to feelings of accomplishment and success. **Bonus: a boost to one's fitness level and self-confidence.**

Volunteering can also provide structure and become a part of anyone's routine. It can also bring

an improved appreciation for your own life and a heightened sense of self-worth.

The best strategy is to surround ourselves with others who share healthy outlets for stress, such as exercising, which, in a group setting, can also alleviate feelings of isolation. Getting involved in peer support, coaching, or just helping out can also help us to feel happy, energized, relaxed and valued. **By putting a focus on helping others in need, we can strengthen our own coping skills and begin to manage our health and well-being.** There are many options to treat and manage addiction,

ranging from medication to family therapy, cognitive-behavioral therapy, and twelve-step programs.

While some traits certainly can make a person more susceptible to developing a drug addiction, **others can be leveraged to excel in a healthy daily life.** Simply having those traits doesn't condemn you to a life of addiction. Why not re-channel that energy into a superpower for establishing healthy new passions?

Chances are you'll find you have a whole new group of fans including your family, friends, colleagues - and yourself.