

Understanding Addiction: Part One of a Four-Part Series

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Addiction is a complex and baffling condition. It is rampant in our society in every form, from drug dependency and alcoholism to eating disorders; gambling; compulsive shopping; spending; smoking; and (in some instances) sex, to name a few. The abuse of prescription drugs has increased rapidly in recent years. Vicodin is one of the most widely abused prescription narcotics today, followed by OxyContin. Both drugs are opiates and are responsible for helping fill beds in treatment facilities nationwide.

Whether it is an addiction to alcohol, prescription narcotics or illicit drugs such as heroin, cocaine and methamphetamine, the results are the same. For every addiction, there is a 12-step treatment program specific to that addiction. As chemical dependency units close their doors, residential treatment facilities for addictions abound. There are regular reports of high-profile personalities that routinely enter treatment centers for their addictions. Facilities for addiction are popping up almost monthly in Malibu, California, most of which now include acupuncture as part of their services. At \$35,000 to \$45,000 a month for treatment, addiction is big business.

Millions of dollars and decades of research have proven that addiction is actually a biological, pathological process that occurs in the brain, the location of which has been mapped through the use of CAT scans. The neurophysiologic pathways involved in addiction are located within the limbic system that houses our emotions. This area is called the *nucleus accumbens*, also known as the "pleasure center" of the brain. The biological process of addiction alters the way in which the brain's pleasure center functions by affecting chemical neurotransmissions. All addictions seem to affect this same area in the brain.

Addiction is considered a biopsychosocial disease in that it affects an individual physiologically, psychologically and socially. Its roots may be biological, affecting the neuronal pathways in the brain; however, the manifestations are behavioral, and can affect a person's relationship with him/herself and with others. It is often called a disease of denial because of the way in which the addiction alters the addict's perception of reality.

The National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence and the American Society of Addiction Medicine define alcoholism/addiction as a "primary, chronic disease with genetic, psychosocial and environmental factors influencing its development and manifestations." Addiction is classified with cancer, heart disease and diabetes as a chronic illness that produces long-term physical, psychological and social damage.

In terms of traditional Chinese medicine, addiction affects both the corporeal and ethereal soul. It affects the manifestation of the breath of life; essence; *shen*; and *qi*. Addiction blocks the opening to the heart. It is within the heart that the spirit resides. When blocked, it cannot communicate with the heavenly influences. The heart channel is the receptacle for these influences. When an individual uses drugs or alcohol as a coping mechanism, spiritual growth ceases. Drugs and alcohol

will block intuitive processes as the maturation process freezes. With continued substance abuse and dependency, serious emotional and physical damage can arise.

Addicts do not acquire the internal mechanisms one needs to navigate through life. They turn to drugs and alcohol for this. Addiction becomes their navigational system, taking addicts further from themselves into an abyss of darkness. The primal core within the addict becomes an entanglement of rationalization and denial. The addict becomes the addiction itself, losing his/her individual, unique personality as the addiction takes over.

The phenomenon of addiction is that the addict will rationalize what is happening and why, attributing personal problems to everything but drugs and/or alcohol. The addict will continue to drink and/or use in spite of the adverse consequences of the addiction. Driven with the need to drink or use, the addict continues to do so to subdue the intense emotional pain created by the drinking and using itself.

Addicts often find their way to us by seeking treatment for a variety of reasons. It is not always easy to recognize the face of addiction and understand the complexities involved when treating a person who presents with a drug or alcohol problem.

Future articles in this series will discuss the different stages of addiction; when to treat; types of treatment; and different programs available.

MARCH 2003