

Do I Have an Addiction?

So you've just realized you might have an addiction – or you've just been brave enough to mention this to someone else. What do you do now? This handout will guide you through some next steps so that you can make the best choices for yourself and your loved-ones.

Are you addicted?

Here are some simple questions to evaluate whether or not you have an addiction. Have other people tried to talk to you about your habit? Is your habit causing you trouble at home, work or school? Do you feel guilty about what you are doing? Do you ever try to hide your actions from others? Have you tried to quit and fallen short of your goal? Do you sometimes carry your habit farther than you intended? Do you experience an almost-irresistible craving for your 'drug of choice'? If you answered yes to two or more questions, you may have a problem which is stealing your ability to live and love to the fullest.

What is addiction?

An addiction is an unhealthy response to the stressors of life which is repeated so many times that it becomes automatic and necessary. You can be addicted to almost anything – alcohol, pornography, relationships, cutting, food, shopping and more. In every case there is a biochemical component to the problem, but where the abuse involves a drug (or induces a drug-like response in the body), you will face the additional hurdle of withdrawal symptoms as you attempt to stop the habit.

Why Can't I Stop?

One reason people have trouble stopping an addictive habit is that they haven't admitted to themselves that it's a problem. If it's not a problem, there is no real motivation to quit. Another reason is the biological component, producing physical discomfort when a person tries to stop. But the real reason is a complex emotional and chemical pattern in the brain which has been forged over many repeated uses. The addiction was originally associated with a feeling of euphoria, a reward sensation, but later on it may be more closely tied to avoiding unpleasant feelings. Stressful situations are now so linked to this repeated pattern that the addiction response is automatic. Refusing to act out the addiction induces even more distress. If there was something else which could reduce your stress level just as well, you would be doing *that*. So, by definition, there is nothing which will feel quite as good as your addiction in the short-run. To overcome it, you will have to reroute the circuits in your brain with new coping skills, and you will have to do that knowing they will not be as effective as your old habits. In other words, you have to be ready to tolerate discomfort for a season in order to achieve long-term freedom.

The Addiction Cycle

There is a cycle which often plays out in the life of an addict who is trying to quit. If that describes you, examine the addiction cycle below and answer the following questions on a separate sheet.



- Think about the last few times you indulged your habit. What were the stressors which preceded your acting out?
- What are the false beliefs you experience that encourage you to act out? (E.g., “This will make me feel better,” “This doesn’t hurt anybody,” “I will only indulge for a little bit,” “No one will know,” “God wants me to be happy,” “I’ll be a better wife if I do this,” etc.)
- Did you experience guilt/shame/depression after acting out? When did they kick in, and how long did they last?
- Did you make any recommitments to limit or stop your habit? What were they? Did you tell anyone else?
- Were you able to stick to your recommitments for any length of time? If so, how long, and what helped you do it?

Beginning Now

Here are some steps you can take right now to begin moving in a different direction. All it takes to make progress toward freedom is one small step followed by another. So look over this list and take as many steps as you can today.

- Write out a prayer asking God's forgiveness for finding your comfort in something that draws you away from Him. You may have done this in the past, but do it again, and then write out your gratitude for His forgiveness, which He *always* offers to those who are sincere. I John 1:9.
- Start an addiction diary cataloging the times you indulge yourself. Note the day and time, the circumstances (including pressures and opportunities), your struggle and the duration of your acting out. Start the diary before you act out, and put it where you will remember to write in it. If privacy is an issue, keep a password-protected file on your computer. This is for you, but it will also be helpful to a counselor or doctor if you decide to see one.
- Tell one other person about your struggle. Tell a counselor, a pastor, a spouse, a friend... someone you trust to love, pray and encourage you through your recovery.
- If your addiction may have serious physical consequences, certainly if you are addicted to any kind of drug, legal or illegal, make an appointment to see a physician to talk about withdrawal.
- Put physical limits in place between you and your addiction. Get as many temptations as possible out of your house. Put some barriers up. Make it hard to indulge so that you will have more time to consider what you are doing.
- Read a book about someone who struggled in the same way.
- Research the various 12-step groups available in your area (AA, SA, Celebrate Recovery, etc.). Just google "12-step recovery" and your city or region. Note down the information for any groups you might be interested in. There is no better attested (or cheaper) way to fight an addiction than by doing it with others who understand what you are going through.
- If you or your family are endangered by your addiction, if abuse or drunk driving or severe weight loss is involved, for example, or if you would prefer to tackle your addiction in a more controlled environment, research in-patient treatment centers in your area. If you have insurance, start by getting their list of covered facilities.
- Fill your life with as much light as possible. You will need multiple healthy coping mechanisms to take the place of one unhealthy addiction. Attend a Bible study or church. Take a walk every day. Make prayer a constant companion. Listen to uplifting music. Learn a new hobby. Begin to experiment with the things that bring you joy. Keep a list of everything that helps you.

*The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases;
His mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning. (Lam. 3:22-23)*