

**Module # 1**

# **What Is Addiction?**

By

**Bill Urell**

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# Introduction

In this, the first module of the course, we will take a look at the question

## **"What Is Addiction?"**

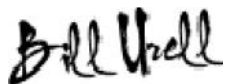
I believe it is an appropriate starting point. In order to improve or resolve a problem, doesn't it make sense to clearly define it?

Today we are going to take a look at 3 different points of view

- 1. The Medical View**
- 2. The 12 Step View**
- 3. Addiction As A Brain Disease**

I have attempted to present each of these 3 segments in easy to understand, though technically accurate concepts and terms. I am presenting the information and leave it to you to take what fits best for you ...and leave the rest.

Enjoy,



# What Is Addiction?

There are many definitions for drug and alcohol addiction, and it can be very confusing getting a clear answer to the question. For the purposes of this discussion, we will look at the three most commonly accepted definitions, or answers to that question:

- 1. The Medical View**
- 2. The 12 Step View**
- 3. Addiction As A Brain Disease**

*Let's start with the Medical View:*

**The American Medical Association states:**

"the AMA endorses the proposition that drug dependencies, including alcoholism, is a disease and that their treatment is a legitimate part of medical practice. "

OK, so the American Medical Association the American Society of Addiction Medicine and a host of others agree that drug addiction and alcoholism are diseases. But it wasn't until about 15 years ago that they could agree on a definition of the disease of addiction.

In 1992 The Joint Committee of the National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence and the American Society of Addiction Medicine formed a committee to study the definition and criteria for the diagnosis of alcoholism.

The goals of the committee were to create by consensus a revised definition that is (1) scientifically valid, (2) clinically useful, and (3) understandable by the general public.

I especially liked #3, a definition 'understandable by the general public'. Here is what they came up with:

**The committee agreed to define alcoholism as:**

"A primary, chronic disease with genetic, psychosocial, and environmental factors influencing its development and manifestations. The disease is often progressive and fatal. It is characterized by impaired control over drinking, preoccupation with the drug alcohol, use of alcohol despite adverse consequences, and distortions in thinking, most notably denial. Each of these symptoms may be continuous or periodic."

Great, I'm a member of the general public, but am not so sure how clear that is, so let's break that down a bit into even more understandable terms.

**Primary:** This suggests that alcoholism, or drug use, as an addiction stands on its own and is not a symptom of another underlying disease state. It refers to the disease as possibly being in addition to, but separate from other states which may be associated with it.

**Disease:** This means impairment or involuntary disability that is associated with a specified common set of characteristics, signs and symptoms that differentiate these individuals from the general population and which places them at a disadvantage.

**Often progressive and fatal...** drug addiction is persistent over time, the physical emotional and social changes are key, and will progress as long using continues. The negative effects of alcohol and drug use accumulate over time and can cause premature death through overdose, suicide, homicide motor vehicle accidents and traumatic events. Medical or organic complications often involve the brain, heart, liver, and many other organs within the body.

**Impaired control:** this is the phenomenon of a person's inability to control their use of alcohol or drugs after a certain point. They become unable to consistently

set enforceable limits on both the quantity consumed, the length of the episode, and their behavior consequences of use.

**Preoccupation:** as the disease progresses, the individual often starts to divert attention and energy away from important life concerns. The alcohol or drug use becomes the central point of focus, or central organizing a factor around which the users life starts to revolve.

**Adverse Consequences** or negative consequences: quite plainly stated, ' bad stuff happens'. The qualities of interpersonal relationships start to suffer. There may be impairments and a decrease in the ability to think clearly, as well as producing altered states of mood and behavior. There may be legal, financial spiritual problems. Physical health problems may start to manifest themselves such as withdrawal symptoms, craving, anemia, liver disease, brain disease etc.

**Characterized By Denial:** Denial is a unique symptom of the disease of addiction. It is much deeper than simply responding negatively to accusations that you have a problem. In order to stay active in their addiction, a user must create a rational framework in which it is OK or the to do so.

These mental manipulations, or psychological defense mechanisms eventually create almost a fantasy world in which it is OK for the user to continue. Some common elements of a denial system are a minimization of how much is actually consumed, and minimizing the negative effects on themselves and people around them.

There is also a tendency to blame people, places, and things for their use, and holding the belief that they are 'entitled' to continue using or it is a reward for their hard work.

## **In Summary**

Addiction can be defined as a chronic relapsing disease. It is characterized by compulsive drug seeking or craving, and the continued use despite negative and harmful consequences.

## ***And now for the 12 Step View:***

The original 12 step program was that of Alcoholics Anonymous. This program was developed in the mid to late 1930's. In this era treatment for alcoholism or drug addiction was essentially commitment to asylum, jail, or death.

The fundamental and then, at the time radical, view was that alcoholism could be viewed as an allergy. The use of alcohol by chronic alcoholics is a

**"manifestation of an allergy; that the phenomenon of craving is limited to this class and never occurs in the average temperature drinker. These allergic types can never safely use alcohol in any form at all; and once having formed the habit and found they cannot break it, once having lost their self confidence, their reliance upon things human, their problems pile up on them and be, astonishingly difficult to solve."** AA Big Book pp. xxvi, The Doctor's opinion

I must admit that the first time I heard alcoholism referred to as an 'allergy', I was a bit taken aback. To me, an allergy was something more like sneezing from ragweed in the springtime. However, much was explained when I looked up the definition of the word allergy. It essentially means, 'an uncommon reaction to a common substance.

An example often utilized that helped me was to think of an allergy to strawberries or shellfish. They are common substances, but for those with an allergy to them their uncommon reaction to them might be wheezing, difficulty breathing, and perhaps a rash.

For an alcoholic, the common substance is alcohol. The uncommon reactions spoken of are obsession and compulsion. These only affect people with the 'allergy' to alcohol'

The foundation statement of the 12 steps , **Step One states:**

**We admitted we're powerless over alcohol (our addiction), and that our lives had become unmanageable.**

Step one simply a statement of the problem, and that is we have developed a lack of control over our addiction and that bad consequences have occurred.

The problem is a primary illness, not caused by lack of moral judgment, nor lack of values or knowledge. The problem is described as in Allergy of the Body and an Obsession of the Mind.

"The physical aspect of our disease is the compulsive use of drugs: in the ability stop using once restarted. The mental aspect of our disease is the obsession, or overpowering desire to use, even when we are trying our lives. The spiritual part of our disease is our total self-centeredness" Narcotics Anonymous.pg.20

The dilemma that occurs is that if we cannot use because of our body, and we can't quit because of our mental obsession then we're truly powerless over chemicals.

The Narcotics Anonymous text states:

"We have a disease: progressive, incurable, and fatal. One way or another we went out and bought our destruction on the time of payment plan! all of us, from the junky snatching purses to this weak little lady hitting two or three doctors for legal prescriptions, have one thing in common: we seek our destruction a bag at a time, a few pills at a time, or a bottle at time until we die.

This is at least part of the insanity of addiction. The price may seem higher for the addict who prostitutes for a fix then it is for the addict who merely applies to a doctor. Ultimately both pay for their disease with their lives. Insanity is repeating the same mistakes and expecting different results"  
The NA text page 23

This brief section on the 12 step view is in no way intended to be a course of instruction on Step one nor the 12 steps. I provided this to show a slightly different view of addiction and alcoholism from the Medical View.

There are some definite commonalities between the two views such as loss of control over the substance. Continued use despite negative consequences, and the fact that untreated the disease is both chronic and progressive.

## **Addiction As A Brain Disease**

Viewing addiction as a brain disease is pretty much on the polar opposite end of the scale as the historic view of addiction being a moral weakness. Supporters of the moralistic view tend to believe that it is simply a matter of just saying "no" and stopping.

As more and more is revealed about the functioning of the brain, through the tremendous technological advances in the last 10 years, understanding drug addiction and recovery become a very complex problem.

**Drugs and alcohol affect the functioning in the brain's limbic system.** The limbic system contains the brains pleasure pathways or reward centers. It is the stimulation and action of chemical changes that occur here that produce feelings of pleasure. The brain learns that one feelings of pleasure occur where motivated to repeat them.

Messages in the brain are transmitted by sending electrical impulses across networks of nerve cells called neurons. Messages are transmitted between neurons by the chemicals called neurotransmitters. This is where it gets interesting.

Alcohol and drugs are chemicals that can enter into and interfere with that chemical communication by mimicking the natural chemicals that occur in the brain.

- 1.** Some examples are heroin or marijuana which fooled brain into sending abnormal messages which are then transmitted.
- 2.** There are other drugs such as the stimulants cocaine and amphetamines which cause the brain cells to release an abnormally large quantities of the brain chemicals.

## Where, Exactly Are We Going With All This?

All mood altering drugs of abuse target the brain's pleasure circuit, or reward system by drowning it with abnormally large quantities of dopamine. Dopamine occurs naturally in the brain and helps regulate the processes of emotion, thinking, motivation, and feelings of pleasure. Over stimulation and amplification of these processes are the 'desired' effects of taking drugs.

## How Do We Get Addicted?

Well, one reason is that drugs can stimulate 100 percent to 1000 percent the amount of dopamine released to reward center. That's almost like saying you can feel 2 to 10 times better with drugs than you can naturally. The effects of drugs also last much longer.

The problem is that our brain starts to adapt to these abnormally large quantities of dopamine it does so by producing less and less of the substance naturally. So, if you're not actually under the effects of drugs your 'resting state', is actually quite low. The brain also reacts to curb the flood by reducing the number of dopamine receptors available in the brain so it does not face continual overload.

This means essentially that you must take drugs just to feel 'normal', and even more and more drugs to get high. This is the symptom of drug addiction known as tolerance.

## Why Do We Take Drugs In The First Place?

I believe that this is the key question to ask yourself. I think that we take action in the expectation of a payoff. Acknowledging what your payoff is from taking drugs or alcohol is a very important piece of knowledge to have when planning your addiction recovery strategy.

**Maybe your answer appears below:**

**1. How about simply for the pleasure?** This might be a real 'ya think' motivation of the fact the matter is says the pleasurable feelings drugs I'll call and produce can be really intense. I heard it described as making the ordinary, extraordinary.

**2. People use to kill pain.** This can be emotional, psychological or physical pain. One thing they cannot be denied about drugs and alcohol is that they are quick and effective in the short run.

**3. The element of curiosity or peer pressure.** A lot of people get started on the path of addiction simply by wanting to fit in with the crowd, or having an intellectual curiosity about the effects of drugs.

**4. Improving performance or perception.** there is no doubt that quite a number of people believe that drinking or taking drugs increases their ability to perform or cope was certain areas of life. Some people also believe it helps their creativity.

## Can Addiction Be Cured?

Most professionals agree that while addiction cannot be cured, it can be managed. The most effective means of Addiction management is abstinence.

I've not yet have had anybody argue with me to vigorously against the position that if you want to stop having trouble with drugs and alcohol and stop taking them.

Abstinence is the goal for the early stage of recovery. As we all know, the object of the exercise is not simply to become abstinent but to grow and reach levels that are rich and full in addiction recovery.

As a member of the recovery Club you will certainly get some ideas and knowledge for growth, recovery, and life skills.

See you next week,

