



A Bewildering Illness

Addiction is no ordinary problem. For both addicts and their families, it's the world's most bewildering, maddening, and frightening illness.

Addiction is bewildering because it doesn't seem to make any sense for people to have no control over their actions. Why would people continue to drink or use drugs when doing so leads to horrendous consequences—when it so often costs them their job and their friends, alienates their loved ones, gets them into legal trouble, and ruins their health?

Why don't they just stop?

It's usually easy to understand a physical disease because it's similar to a broken part on a car. The pancreas is supposed to regulate blood sugar, for instance, but in a person with diabetes it's broken and it doesn't work properly. It can even be fairly easy to understand a mental illness such as schizophrenia because in that case it's a different part of the body—the brain—that isn't working properly, and the person is out of touch with reality.

But addiction is bewildering because nothing about the addict's body seems to be broken, and in general, addicts *are* in touch with reality. They're usually completely aware of the choices they're making. They may know that they love their family, and yet their family feels hurt by their actions. They may know that they're losing their job, running out of money, and left with fewer and fewer good options in life.

They may know that they're slowly (or not so slowly) killing themselves. And yet they keep going.

Addiction is also bewildering because addicts seem to have free will about every other aspect of their life. They can decide what to wear and what to eat for breakfast. Many are high-functioning, and during the day they can hold down very responsible jobs as lawyers, businesspeople, firefighters, teachers, and so on. Their lack of free will is limited to one very specific choice.

Addiction is bewildering not just to loved ones, but to addicts themselves. They often have no idea why they do what they do.

Addiction is maddening because the solution seems so simple: *Just stop*. Addicts often say, "I desperately wish I could stop," and they mean it. But they can't.

Addiction is also maddening for loved ones because they're used to being able to influence a family member's behavior. Typically, loved ones do everything they can think of to try to get the addict to quit, ranging from "a good long talk" to bargaining, pleading, shaming, yelling, wheedling, threatening, and punishing. Over time, they usually come to realize that none of these things works.

The inability to stop the ongoing train wreck often leaves family members feeling hopeless, powerless, and frustrated. Sometimes they blame themselves. They also often feel personally rejected. "If she loved me, she'd quit," they think. And the problem is frequently worsened by the tendency of addicts to blame those closest to them for their problems.

Addiction is frightening because it involves a loss of free will, which we think of as an essential component of our personalities—one of the things that makes us *us*. We typically don't identify with our pancreas, so we can more easily accept that our pancreas doesn't work properly. But take away our free will, our ability to make decisions and express who we are, and we feel that we're losing our very selves.

Addiction is also frightening because it threatens to take away not just addicts' health, as other diseases do, but everything else that they and their families value along the way. Addiction doesn't just want to kill people. It first wants to strip them of their money, their jobs, their friends, their families, their homes, their social respect, their autonomy, their sense of meaning and purpose, and their ability to enjoy anything at all in life.

And *then* kill them.

For now, there is no cure for addiction. At best, it can be managed as a lifelong chronic condition, similar to diabetes. But the fact that it *can* be managed, and often is, is still an enormous advance. Far more treatment options are available now than in the past, including rehabilitation programs, psychotherapy, prescription drugs, and support groups. On their own or with treatment, many addicts are able to put the problem behind them for good, and many others are able to enjoy long periods of recovery.

While we can't magically cure addiction, we can make it less bewildering. To understand how the problem affects addicts and their families, and how best to approach treating it, a good place to start is to understand what precisely addiction is and how it affects the brain.

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