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The Olympic Torch of Hope

Moving Away from Addictions

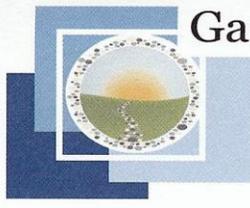
One pain pill, one bet, one TV show, one drink, one web site, one sexual text, one shopping trip, one gambling episode and one piece of chocolate usually are not harmful (unless you are a recovering addict). But any one of the above behaviors used habitually could become a problem or yield a harsh diagnosis of addiction or dependence. Clinically, dependence (Hart) refers to a state in which the individual uses the drug or behavior so frequently and consistently that it is difficult to do without it. For many, psychological dependence, and for some, physical dependence develops over time. If you cannot cut down or control your use or involvement and a great deal of time and effort is devoted to the problem, things can exacerbate. This being said, most people don't need or want the diagnosis of a psychotherapist or family member, they just want to know how to enjoy this chemical or behavior without getting into trouble.

Another way of defining dependence is the acronym WART: With Addiction, Repeated Trouble. If one is getting into trouble more than once in a relationship because of a habit or behavior, it may be a problem. If one has trouble at work because of a repetitive habit, it may be a problem. If one is avoiding daily responsibilities because of a recurring behavior, it may be a problem.

Clients often are most interested in what they can do about the habit or problem. "Don't just tell me to quit forever and go to 12 step meetings," they say. While that works for some, you can start doing numerous alternative behaviors that bring you pleasure and relief. I review lists of "Pleasant Events" with clients. What did you do in the past that was pleasant and fulfilling? Reading, writing, walking the dog, cooking healthy meals, calling a friend, playing games, taking a hot bath, attending a spiritual/religious talk, breathing slowly, meditating, watching the sunset and on and on. When you are feeling positive and grateful, write a long list of alternative behaviors that you enjoy or would like to do. Addictions tend to narrow our lives. You may have just a thing or two that you LOVE to do daily. Recovery is about expanding life's options again and fortunately we live in a time when our options are limitless.

A second suggestion is to involve at least one person in your resolution. Tell a good friend, relative or psychotherapist about the problem and what you want to do to change. Let your secret out of the bag and dissertate as long as necessary. It is well known that most people who quit smoking or maintain a weight loss make commitments to other people. Again, the secret is out and others will help us be accountable.

Another thing that helps recovery from addiction is simply to distract yourself. If you are sitting still and have a serious craving to do that potentially self-destructive behavior—do something else. Almost anything else will help! Get up, move and do some of your pleasant events; extricate yourself from that same chair or room. You are a unique individual and things that are



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healthy distractions for you may be addictive or problematic for another. Some can exercise, drink something, go on-line or watch a movie and it helps distract them. When you are dealing with addiction and problematic behaviors, ANY movement toward change and moderation increases your self-esteem and makes you feel exceptionally proud of yourself.

A fourth helpful tool is to set a goal to NOT do your problematic behavior for a period of time and stick to it. For example, "Today, I will not go to the casino, eat chocolate, shop, cruise a porn site or whatever is not healthy." If you are cutting back on alcohol or drugs, since these are powerful chemicals, seek medical attention for titrating down or detoxification. I have observed that for most, twenty (20) hours a day are fairly easy to manage. Most addictive urges occur during about 4 hours on most days. Can you avoid engaging in that problematic behavior for just 4 hours? I encourage clients to determine which four hours are most difficult and set up healthy distractions and supportive activities during these hours.

Finally, develop at least three (3) healthy, supportive relationships. A good friend, spouse, co-worker or exercise buddy can be extremely supportive. Some of them may know about your goal to reduce your problem and others just like sharing time with you. Use your phone to connect with them when you are down or feeling an urge to go back to that unhealthy behavior. For some this does develop into a support group at church or Gamblers or Alcoholics Anonymous. These programs encourage sponsorship or a Big Brother or Sister who is a step ahead of you and can help guide you in a healthy direction.

As a therapist, I see part of my job is to carry the Olympic torch of Hope. We have seen many other people get through the same dependence that you are having and we can guide you with the light of the flame in the right direction. No Olympian ever achieved the success or a gold medal without practice, help and guidance.

With help there is Hope!

Hart, Ksir, Ray, (2009) *Drugs, Society and Human Behavior*, 13th Edition, McGraw-Hill