

## Help with Addiction

– Learning to tolerate discomfort as a tool to break an unhelpful pattern.

Addiction can take many forms, and substance use (drugs and alcohol in particular) and sex are both common forms of addiction. My sense is that addiction is similar to depression in that it is a pattern of thinking and behaviour that becomes stronger with repetition. Like depression, addiction can be a harder problem to overcome if not identified and interrupted early. Think of a car driving back and forth over soft ground. Eventually deep ruts are created in the ground, and the capacity to turn the wheel and break out of these ruts gets more and more difficult (but not impossible!).

In his helpful, simple guide to the managing anxiety, depression and addiction, Steven Melemis (2010) suggests that addiction has a strong genetic element, and that some people are much more susceptible to addiction than others because of this genetic predisposition. In simple terms, if you have family members (in particular parents or grandparents) who experienced addiction, then you may be at greater risk yourself.

It sounds worrying I guess. My point is not to alarm or discourage. Rather, the encouragement is to do something once the problem is identified.

Melemis provides a simple framework for the treatment of addiction. He says that naming addiction (and acknowledging that one is an addict) is an important first step. Our minds are good at playing tricks on us. A person experiencing depression will at times be convinced that nothing good will ever happen in their life, and also that no treatment will be successful. Similarly a person experiencing addiction will often have a story to support this addictive behaviour – that they need their addiction to manage, that they deserve a treat from time to time, that it's not really a problem.

Melemis goes on to propose a number of strategies based on an abstinence model. He suggests that one needs to spot the early warning signs of relapse before one gets to the stage of toying with the idea of the addictive behaviour – early warning signs such as feeling tired, hungry, lonely and sad. Once these precursors develop into ruminating about using drugs or having a drink (for example), the opportunity to interrupt this downward spiral is much reduced.

Pema Chodron is a wise Buddhist nun who outlines what I feel is a very helpful, related framework to understand and treat addiction. She uses the analogy of a child with scabies. If the child gives in and scratches the itching scabies, then the scabies will spread and the problem gets worse. The child has to be convinced to sit with the discomfort of the itch. Pema Chodron encourages the use of meditation as a strategy to help learn to sit with discomfort. She also uses a powerful and simple extension to this analogy – she suggests that you ask yourself, “Do I want to bleed to death?” Continuing to scratch the itch can only end one way.

Similarly, one of Melemis's strategies is to encourage people wrestling with addiction to be honest about where their addiction is taking them, and to have an alternate desired future goal - the future without addiction. He suggests that one might need to lean on this as a motivator (that is, to think about what you are giving up long term) when tempted by thoughts of returning to the addictive behaviour. He sees this long term perspective as a useful counter to the short term lure of addiction thoughts that wrongly suggest that “just once won’t hurt.”

The last part of the puzzle is to attend to the pain that sits under the addiction – the deep sadness that often fuels the need to self soothe. Breaking out of an addictive spiral requires attending to this pain as well as treating the symptom of addiction. It also requires being gentle with oneself about one's addiction, as the shame of addiction is adding more pain to this underlying sadness. Addiction *is* treatable - one step at a time.

Two great resources to help with addiction:

“I Want To Change My Life: How to Overcome Anxiety, Depression and Addiction,” by Steven Melemis (2010). Available on-line from [Amazon](#) or the [Book Depository](#) for less than \$20.

“Getting Unstuck: Breaking Your Habitual Patterns & Encountering Naked Reality,” audio CD by Pema Chodron, available from <http://pemachodronfoundation.org/buy-cds-dvds/#unstuck>

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