

ADDICTIVE BEHAVIORS

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MarthaElin Mountain, Ed.D., M.A., MFT
26465 Carmel Rancho Blvd. #3 • Carmel, CA 93923
831.624.5773 • MEMdocMFT@gmail.com

How Addictions Start

Seeking pleasurable feelings is an essential part of a healthy life. Excitement, fun, safety, high status, bonding, power, love, importance, belonging, approval, and winning are just a *few* examples of pleasurable feelings we human beings seek. Normally, a desired, pleasurable feeling does not become fixated or rigidly linked in the brain to a particular behavior. In other words, in a healthy life style, we typically do not *rely* on a particular behavior *in order to get a positive feeling we want*.

The more deprived of a desired feeling a person is, however, the more intensely she wants to experience that feeling. A build-up of intense need can prime her brain to send a mandate for getting the need met. Thus, depending on a person's emotional history, a rigid link can develop between an intensely desired positive feeling and a specific behavior. Any behavior can become an addiction if our brain rigidly links it with experiencing a pleasure feeling we have an underlying desire for or need to feel. Once the behavior and feeling do become linked in the brain, the urge to do that action will be intensely powerful---as powerful as our need to experience the desired feeling.

Examples of Feelings a Person May Desire

Joy	Freedom
Safety	Invincibility
Love	Importance
Victory	High status
Sophistication	Defiance
Wholeness	Reward
Validation	Productivity
Belonging	Approval
Being part of a family	Winner
Feeling special	Friendship
Power	Being "seen" or "heard"
Strength	Competence

The Compulsive Behavior Experience

With an addiction or compulsive behavior, a person feels an increasing sense of tension or arousal before doing the behavior and then experiences pleasure, gratification, or relief at the time of doing the behavior. Afterward, there may or may not be feelings of regret, guilt, or self-reproach. In other words, a person feels compelled to do the behavior even if she knows that it will have destructive or negative consequences. The person justifies the behavior by thinking thoughts, such as “I’ll win this time,” “he deserves it,” “people will notice me.” For most people, their compulsive behavior has become almost automatic; there is little awareness of any underlying feelings.

For example, a **smoker** may only focus on needing to feel relaxed, even though, in actuality, that is not the *underlying*, strongly desired feeling linked with the behavior. A **compulsive gambler** may only notice the feeling he remembers from a big win, in spite of the many losses he has had. A **compulsive shopper** may only notice the excitement of buying something new, even though she cannot afford it, and not her desire to “fit in.” Someone who is having **difficulty releasing a toxic or unhappy relationship**, or who continues an abusive one, may only focus on positive feelings experienced at various times in the relationship, and not his need to feel part of a family. A **chronic “cheater” in relationships** may notice the power she feels, but not the deep loneliness.

Examples of Compulsive Behaviors

Here is a list of various addictive or compulsive behaviors:

- Angry Outbursts
- Binge eating
- Co-Dependency
- Cutting
- Overeating
- Gambling
- Pornography
- Relationship
- Sex
- Shopping
- Smoking
- Substance Abuse
- Working

Any of the above-mentioned addictive behaviors can have more than one intensely desired feeling rigidly linked with it.

Below are two examples of compulsive behaviors and some desired feelings they *could* be linked with:

Behavioral Addiction	Possible Underlying Desired Feeling
1. Shopping	Feel unique, different from others Be “seen” Fit in Have high status Look good Get what I want
2. Angry Outbursts	Be “heard” Feel powerful Defiance Win Dominate

Related Fantasies

Fantasies, or made-up images, underlie addictive behaviors. Here are some examples of thoughts that might accompany someone’s image of him- or herself doing the addictive behavior:

“When I smoke X-Brand cigarettes, I’m a man.”

“When I spend money, I am high-status.”

“When I play poker, I’m a winner.”

“When I buy clothes, I fit in with the fashionable people.”

In the addiction therapy process, there is a simple, effective intervention for addressing the associated fantasy so that it is no longer a motivator for the compulsive behavior.

Why Addictions Are Hard to Overcome

No one wants to let go of an addictive behavior; there is always a part of the person that wants to continue doing the behavior. Even when a person has decided that the consequences of the behavior are so destructive that she has to stop, she is still in a conflict with her own needs for the desired feeling(s). This is why relapse is so common.

It is not the behavior that is difficult to stop doing; it is the pleasurable feeling the person would be giving up. As long as the desired feeling is identified with the behavior, giving up the behavior means giving up an intensely desired feeling. It is the *feeling* the person wants, not the behavior.

Feeling State Addiction Therapy (FSAP) for Resolving Addictive Behaviors

I am professionally trained in the Feeling State Addiction Protocol (FSAP), developed by Dr. Robert Miller. The goal of this approach is to DE-link a person’s intensely desired feeling from the specific compulsive behavior. Once the underlying, desired feeling has been disconnected from the behavior, the

behavior is no longer needed to achieve the desired feeling; it becomes irrelevant. With the feeling and behavior unlinked from each other in the brain, the person can learn to seek the desired feeling in other ways---ways that are part of a healthy life style.

I use the FSAP as part of my therapy approach with people who are functioning adequately in their daily life and are ready to shift out of an addictive behavior. I also use the FSAP protocol with individuals who have been through residential treatment and want to prevent or address relapse. *(I recommend that individuals with active addictions, seriously compromised lifestyles, and complex addiction histories seek specialized medical care and therapy to stabilize their condition before seeking resolution with the FSAP.)*

Length of treatment depends on a your personal history, motivation, and complexity of your addictive behavior. Understanding personal history, including any traumas, is essential in determining the most effective approach to healing your addiction. Addressing and resolving an addictive behavior with the FSAP can range from 3-4 sessions to an extended period of several weeks or months.

Contact me with any questions you may have.

EMAIL: MEMdocMFT@gmail.com and VOICE: 831.624.5773.