

Chapter 2

Self-Deception and Addictive Thinking

I cannot stress enough the importance of realizing that addicts are taken in by their own distorted thinking and that they are its victims. Often when we hear the old using or drinking stories of recovering addicts, we realize that this person suffered greatly during active addiction and that many people are still suffering in the same way.

Addictive Thinking and Intelligence

Alan, a recovering alcoholic, was oblivious to the effects of his drinking, in spite of what people said to him. Since he drank only beer, he was certain he did not have an alcohol problem.

Eventually Alan became physically sick and could no longer deny that something was wrong. He concluded that by drinking half a case of beer daily, he was consuming too much fluid. So he switched to scotch and soda. When the physical symptoms got worse, he faulted the soda and switched to whiskey and water. As his symptoms got even worse, he eliminated the water. Is this rational thinking? Of course not. Addictive thinking is not affected by intelligence. People functioning at the highest intellectual levels are as vulnerable to these thinking distortions as anyone else. Christine, a brilliant and highly skilled attorney, adamantly refused to attend AA meetings, lest the exposure of her alcoholism jeopardize her career and standing in the community. Yet, one evening she left the office and walked out into the cold November day. Her next memory if coming to, leaning against a downtown office building. Anyone seeing her would correctly assume she was drunk. Though she publicly appeared in this condition, she was too embarrassed to let someone see her walk into a church for an AA meeting.

Why didn't this woman's brilliant analytical mind prevent her from such absurd reasoning? The craving for the chemical exists and distorts our judgment. The need for the chemical is so powerful that it fulfills the function of addictive thinking: to permit the person to continue the destructive habit. The addict begins with the conclusion "*I need a drink*" (or drugs) and then builds a case for that conclusion, whether it is logical or not, and whether or not the facts support it.

Why Children Take Drugs, Why Parents Drink

An understanding of addictive thinking can help explain why some efforts at preventing alcoholism or other drug abuse fail. We live in a society fueled by technology where the argument is "Why wait? I'm enjoying life right now by drinking." Our culture thrives on technology that eliminates waiting. We are consumers of instant gratification which makes a long wait intolerable. To prevent substance abuse in young people, we would have to establish (1) ultimate goals in life and (2) tolerance for delay.

Self-Deception and Attending Twelve Step Groups

Involvement in a Twelve Step program is extremely important in recovery, yet many people resist these programs. The wife of a financial planner refused to go to Al-Anon because she feared the people would take their business away from her alcoholic husband if they saw her at a meeting. Others say they have nothing in common with those people at the 'meetings' and can see no way that the 'meetings' could help. The anxiety about change can be so intense that people contradict themselves.

Making Changes

How is it that people can so blatantly contradict themselves, yet not be able to recognize it even if it is pointed out? In one word, the answer is denial. As long as someone denies reality, he or she can continue behaving the same as before. Acceptance of reality might commit him or her to the very difficult process of change. When the alcoholic says, "I wouldn't have to drink the way I do if my partner were more considerate," he or she is really saying, "I don't need to change. Make my partner change. I'll be just fine then." Often codependents seek help for someone else and they hear that they can do nothing to alter the addict's behavior. When the expert suggests that they look at their own behavior and begin to make changes in themselves, they often back away. "Change myself? Why should I change myself? I'm not the one who's drinking!"

The Rule of the Three Cs

Al-Anon endorses the rule of the Three Cs: You did not CAUSE it, you cannot CONTROL it, and you cannot CURE it. But many people *do* feel responsible for another's addiction, *do* try to control it, and *do* believe that they can cure it. All the features of addictive thinking are present in the addict as well as in the codependent, and the only distinguishing feature may be the chemical use.

[Twerski, Abraham J. M.D. Addictive Thinking, Understanding Self-Deception: 2nd Ed. Hazelden: Center City, Minnesota, 1997 1990]