

Chapter 5

Origins of Addictive Thinking

The most convincing theory on how addictive thinking develops was presented in a 1983 article by Dr. David Sedlak. Sedlak describes addictive thinking as a person's inability to make consistently healthy decisions in his or her own behalf. He stresses that this unique thinking disorder does not affect other kinds of reasoning. Thus, a person who develops a thinking disorder may be intelligent, intuitive, persuasive, and capable of valid philosophical and scientific reasoning. The peculiarity of addictive thinking is the inability to reason with oneself. This can apply to various emotional and behavioral problems, but is invariably found in addiction: alcoholism, other drug addiction, compulsive gambling, eating disorders, nicotine addiction and codependency.

How does this inability to reason with oneself develop? First, a person must have adequate facts about reality. A person who does not know the damage alcohol or other drugs can do cannot reason correctly about their use. Second, a person must have certain values and principles as grounds for making choices. People develop values and principles from their culture as well as from their home. For instance, a young man growing up with family or cultural values that say that a man proves his masculinity by being able to hold his liquor may be expected to drink excessively. Failure to live up to these expectations can generate deep disappointment. Third, the person must develop a healthy and undistorted self-concept. Small children feel extremely insecure and threatened in a huge and overwhelming world. A major source of their security is reliance on adults, primarily parents. If parents make bad judgment calls and behavioral choices the child is unable to make the connection that the parent's choice was irrational, but rather that they are unable to judge things correctly. They believe the world to be a fair, just and rational place, and when parents demand things of young children, which they are incapable of doing, it reinforces the child's thought that he is inadequate. On the other hand, when parents do too much for the child, which they could do for themselves, the feeling of inadequacy is reinforced in the child's mind. Because of this feeling of inadequacy, the child could then be prone to substance abuse in order to feel "normal".

Chapter 6

Denial, Rationalization, and Projection

The three most common elements in addictive thinking are (1) denial, (2) rationalization, and (3) projection. Although denial is thought of as lying about something, the denial of an addictive thinker is neither conscious nor willful. The addict may react according to their unconscious perceptions. If their perceptions were valid, their behavior would be perfectly understandable. Unless we can show them that their perception is faulty, we cannot expect their reactions and behavior to change. In the case of an addicted person, what is so terrifying is that awareness of being an alcoholic or a drug addict is beyond acceptance. Until denial is overcome, addicts are not lying when they say they aren't dependent on chemicals. They are truly unaware of their dependency.

Rationalization and projection serve at least two main functions: (1) they reinforce denial, and (2) they preserve the status quo. Rationalization means providing “good” or plausible reasons instead of true reasons. A fairly reliable rule of thumb is that when people offer more than one reason for doing something, they are probably rationalizing. Usually the true reason for any action is a single one. Rationalizing also preserves the status quo, making the addict feel it is acceptable not to make necessary changes. This characteristic of addictive thinking can operate long after an addict overcomes denial and becomes abstinent.

Projection means placing the blame on others for things we are really responsible for ourselves. Blaming someone else seems to relieve an addict from the responsibility of making changes: “As long as you do this to me, you cannot expect me to change.” Since the others are not likely to change, the drinking and other drug use can continue. These three major elements of addictive thinking, denial, rationalization and projection, must be addressed at every stage of recovery. The progressive elimination of these distortions of reality allows for improvement in recovery.

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