

Addiction

We are looking at addictions in this issue. The holiday season is usually a difficult one for overindulgence in many things. Spending, eating, partying, drinking and for recovering addicts it is a particularly challenging time. The first step toward overcoming addiction is to acknowledge the addiction itself.



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Is it fun or addiction?

A lot of people indulge in potentially addictive behaviours without falling into addiction. They can have a couple of drinks at a party and not become an alcoholic. Others spiral into a full blown addiction with potentially dire results physically, mentally and emotionally. But which one is an addict and which one is just having some fun?



Addiction meets two criteria:

You have difficulty controlling how much you use or how long you use. For example, one drink leads to several drinks. One line of cocaine leads to more. You can't just have one drink, once in a while.

You continue to use even though it has negative consequences to your life. For instance, you continue to use even if it has caused problems in your relationship(s) or at work. You continue to drink, for instance, even though your doctor has said it would compromise your liver. You continue to gamble even though you can't afford to do so.

This applies to any addictive behavior such as (but not limited to) alcohol, drugs (both prescription and illegal), nicotine, shopping, sexual or gambling addictions and addictive eating disorders.

There are levels of addiction. On one end of the scale there is the Non-Functioning Addict This is someone who has lost their job(s), perhaps lost their home and family and have to use every day. This is the stereotypical street junkie. This is actually pretty rare. At the other end of the scale is the Functioning Addict. They often don't consider themselves to be addicts because they have a job, their relationships are relatively in tact, from the outside they look perfectly normal. But from the inside, they aren't. They are suffering in some way because of their addiction. This is what most addicts look like. This and everything in between.



The consequences of addition get worse as time goes by. Addiction is a progressive disease. The problems associated with continuing to use never go away, they get worse. As you go along, quitting gets harder. For all levels of addiction, and all kinds of addictive behaviour today is always the best day to quit.

Please contact me if you want to discuss any substance or behaviour addiction issues. A large part of controlling an addiction is changing negative aspects of one's lifestyle. I can help you do that.

'tis the Season to be Jolly...or is it?

The following article touched me deeply. Marianna surprised me with her candor and bravery in exposing disturbing facts about her childhood. I treat a lot of alcoholics and people with substance abuse issues. I also treat a lot of people like Marianna, people who were wounded in some way from time spent living with addicts. It's a special kind of hell addicts make for themselves and those around them. Marianna's article illustrates that you can learn to get over this and go on to lead a happy, productive life. I hope reading this will increase your awareness about your reactions to the holiday season.

Francesca

Auntie Stress

By: Marianna Paulson B.Ed., B.P.E.-O.R.

For a child growing up in the home of an alcoholic, any holiday season is fraught with painful memories of years gone by when the season was anything but joyous.

Even as an adult, living away from the situation, the alcoholic can still have a strong hold on how one perceives the holidays. For many years, I was unaware that just turning the calendar



to "December" was enough of a trigger to cause my body to go through 1400 physical and chemical reactions. These reactions produce a host of side-effects which can leave us feeling anxious, worn out and unable to enjoy life. Their purpose is to prepare the body for flight or fight and if untransformed, can impact our memory, decision-making and problem-solving skills. They are not to be taken lightly. Cortisol, the "stress hormone", is connected to a variety of serious illnesses, which may not show up for decades.

Merry-making is ramped up during this season, which makes it difficult for the alcoholic to avoid the drinks scene. Despite vowing to abstain or limit the alcohol intake, there is extreme pressure to consume. For someone who is addicted, it doesn't take much encouragement before they're raising a glass or a bottle.

The amygdala is a small gland in the brain that is responsible for emotional memory. In prehistoric times, it allowed us to learn that the sabre-toothed tiger was a threat to our lives and that we had to beware or be eaten. In an alcoholic home, there is repeated exposure to fear-producing events, thus causing a strong association to things that remind us of that time. As we go through life, the amygdala continues to look for matches and when it finds something that is close enough, will prepare our body for the stress response - fight or flight. The trigger is often imperceptible- it would be the sound of someone's voice, ice in a glass, a certain expression on someone's face or the sight of a particular holiday decoration. Unless we are aware that we are reacting to a trigger, we can expect a wide range of less-than-seasonal feelings which can include, but are not limited to, depression, regret, loneliness and anger.

For me, the awareness that my amygdala is looking for a match, has made an impact upon my healing. Now that I know that a lot of the negative feelings are side-effects of the stress response, I can usually catch them in time.

This has been a process of learning and growing and one that I continue to use on a daily basis. It also helps to know that I can have an effect on my "internal pharmacy" by choosing my thoughts and emotions. When I choose to activate positive emotions, I know that I am changing my heart rhythms- the smoother the heart rhythms, the better I feel. The better I feel, the better I do. When our mood changes for the better, all the little things that bothered us fall away and we live our lives in a way that is resourceful for us.

In an old pattern of thinking and feeling? Consider the fact that you've noticed what you are doing and that you are looking to make some changes by replacing your old behaviours with new ones. That's a big step in itself and one that is worth appreciating and celebrating. Be patient and stick with it, the rewards are well worth the effort.

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