

Where Does Addiction Come From? (transcript)

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<https://charleseisenstein.org/video/where-does-addiction-come-from/>

You can understand a lot about our culture through the lens of addiction. And addiction is another area where we attack the symptom and ignore the cause. And that strategy, of trying to suppress the expression, comes from a view of human nature – it's another expression of the war against the self. I see addiction as coming from unmet needs, where the true object of the need is unavailable. Desire is born from unmet needs – if you are hungry, you desire food; if you hold your breath you need air, you desire to breathe. Very simple: desire comes from unmet needs. But if the object of the need is unavailable, then the desire gets displaced onto a substitute. The substitute doesn't meet the real need, therefore you need more and more and more of the substitute. No amount will be enough.

So if the real need is for, say, intimacy, like you're lonely, you need intimacy. And you're just not in community. And maybe you've received traumas in your life that cut you off from intimate relationships. Well, OK, that's not available, but food is. So here's a moment of connection, here's something that meets this hunger, at least temporarily. But how much food is going to really meet your need for intimacy? Is there an amount where you're so full that you no longer are lonely? No amount is enough. That's an addiction. An addiction comes from a substitute for what's really needed.

So if the need is for testing your boundaries, exploring and expanding beyond yourself, and those opportunities are not available for one reason or another, you might become addicted to gambling, because here's the risk. I'm putting it on the line here! The real need is to put it on the line for something you care about, but perhaps that's just not in the way your life has been set up. Or maybe the need is for.....I could go on with every single area of addiction. With narcotics, opioids, obviously the need is just to feel OK, because of the unresolved trauma, the wounds that accumulate in our society, the psychological wounds, the physical wounds. We have a need to just feel OK. Really, it's a need for healing. It's the desire for healing. And so here's the opioid or the alcohol that makes the pain go away for a little while. But it doesn't address the cause of the pain. It makes the pain go away. It makes the hopelessness go away, it makes the despair go away – for a little while. Or the cocaine or the crack – it makes the depression go away for awhile. You feel powerful, for a little bit. Not so different from addiction to sports dramas, where your unexpressed desire for greatness is displaced onto your sports heroes.

So some of these addictions are culturally sanctioned, because they deplete enough of the life energy to fit you into the productive box that society wants you to be in. And others are prohibited or frowned upon, because they do not enable you to continue complying with the routines of modern life.

Obviously the way to resolve an addiction is to meet the real need. I don't see any of our policy makers talking about that, when it comes to the opioid crisis. I'll cite a study that really resonated with my views on this matter. It involved rats, and this is actually quite well known

now. In the 40's and 50's they did addiction experiments where they took these lab rats and fed them heroin, and they gave them a choice: heroin or food. And they chose heroin, until they starved. So the conclusion that they drew was, desire is not to be trusted. Nature is not to be trusted. We've got to keep those drugs away from people, through the war on drugs, through interdiction, through prohibition, through punishment. Make sure that your depraved desires are not going to run loose, because this devil will drag you down into a spiral of hell. Well, I think it was in the 80's or 90's, this researcher named Bruce Shapiro repeated the experiment. But this time he didn't use caged rats. Instead he built a rat park for them, where the rats, instead of being isolated in cages all by themselves, got to run around and make love with other rats and have nests and have all these exercise things, and it was a paradise for rats. And in that circumstance, the rats might try the heroin, but they weren't that interested. They would go back to the food. And even addicted rats who were taken from their cages and put into the rat paradise – they would wean themselves off the opioid and become unaddicted.

So the proneness to addiction wasn't just human nature, or rat nature, it was a symptom of circumstances. So we've got to look to changing the circumstances, and it could be social circumstances, or it could be psychological circumstances, life circumstances. So if you're addicted to something, whether it's food or alcohol or pornography or gambling, or something more subtle, then you've got to ask, what is the unmet need? And that opens a gateway to healing and to grief. And maybe to unknowing. Because you may very well know what that need is, and you've known it all along. And maybe you can put words to it and maybe you can't. But just because you know what it is doesn't mean you know what to do about it. It's not trivial to meet that need. It's not because you were stupid that you weren't meeting it. It's because you didn't know how, or because it just wasn't available.

But at least it's a start. Step one is to understand that you're not bad, that it is a symptom of an unmet need. Step two is to feel into what that need is. And then that becomes a prayer: if you hold that intention to meet your real needs, eventually you'll have opportunities to bring that in. But it's not like an easy recipe to do that.