



Prisoners of addiction

Words: Joyce Walter

Most addicts have at least one thing in common – emotional needs that are not being expressed or met. That's the belief of Mark Evans, a counsellor who uses the Human Givens approach to psychotherapy, which is based on our innate needs, who is an expert in the treatment of addiction. Evans says, 'At the risk of sounding simplistic, genuinely happy people do not, in my experience, become addicts. People who become addicted tend to be unhappy or unfulfilled in a key area of their life, such as relationships or work.'

Basic emotional needs not being met in these areas of life include security, attention, affection, control, emotional connection to another and to be stretched in what you do. 'Emotional health is being able to experience all your feelings, including the painful ones, without trying to anaesthetise them,' explains Nottingham psychotherapist Diane Beechcroft, who works with addicts and their families. 'A drink, a cake, or a dress may make you feel better for a while, but as they cannot give you affection or address any other unmet emotional need, more anaesthetising of your feelings will probably continue. So the habit or substance then becomes a secondary problem in your life, on top of the original unmet need – and sadly, because it will impact on your relationships, work and many other aspects of your life, this can ultimately stop you from getting your emotional needs met even further.'

According to Evans, people stay stuck with their addiction because they lack a proper understanding of it and of how it became a controlling force. 'Emotional arousal and neediness can stop you from seeing the bigger picture,' he says. 'But once you acknowledge your addiction and start to understand your relationship with it, the solutions to overcome it can soon follow.'

We asked four addicts about their experiences. Each is, or has been, addicted to very different things. But there are common threads, or warning signs, that run through all four stories – and through most cases of addiction. ➤



The drinker

Gill, 48, kept her drinking problem hidden for many years, or at least she thought she did. 'I wasn't the type to go out to the pub and fall flat on my face,' she explains. 'I drank behind closed doors. I worked as a care assistant for patients with dementia, so I figured they wouldn't notice and I could get away with it. I'd keep some vodka in a Coke bottle during working hours, but it was after work that the serious drinking began. I'd have a gin and tonic to start the evening, then keep going with wine over dinner. Over six years or so, the quantities increased, so I could easily get through a couple of bottles of wine a night and a fair bit of vodka or gin.'

'At first I drank because I genuinely enjoyed it, but this changed to where I relied on drink for any pleasure, and to numb my negative feelings. My marriage was in trouble, and drinking made me forget my problems. But the bind was that drinking also caused its own problems – I was becoming increasingly accident prone and having blackouts, where I couldn't remember what I had done or where I'd been the night before. I felt helpless to stop drinking but it still took me years to admit I had a problem. In my mind, alcoholics were homeless down-and-outs who couldn't keep a job – I didn't fit that profile.'

Then one day I woke up on the hard ceramic tiles of my bathroom floor with bruises all over my legs and blood coming from a cut on my face, and I had no idea what had happened to me. It really scared me, so that's when I dialled the number for Alcoholics Anonymous. It took me a few weeks of meetings to decide never to touch alcohol again. I had cravings and part of me wanted to drink to take away the feelings. But over time, the benefits of not drinking began to outweigh the pleasure I thought alcohol was giving me. By losing alcohol and the grip it had over my life, I found myself, and the courage to leave a marriage that wasn't right for me. The life I am living now is richer than I could have ever imagined when I was hiding away with my secret Coke bottle.'

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THE COMMON THREADS

- Behaviour that becomes progressively out of control and compulsive
- Spending a lot of time and energy thinking about the activity or substance
- Adverse effects on your relationships and work
- Self denial of the scale of the problem
- Lying to conceal the extent of the problem from others
- Increasingly larger amounts needed for the same effect
- Withdrawal signs or cravings when you cut back or stop
- Negative effects on your emotional and physical health

The pill popper

Last year, Jeni, 22, had a bad headache and took a prescription painkiller, Solpadol, which contains paracetamol and codeine, to relieve it. Her husband was recovering from a back injury, so he had a supply of these powerful tablets to hand. 'After taking it, I felt amazing,' explains Jeni. 'The headache was gone, and I did the housework, played with my daughter, got dressed, put my make-up on and cooked dinner, all in the space of a couple of hours. Not only did the pill cure my headache, it seemed to resolve all my worries too, and make my domestic world a brighter place.'

'I had been feeling the strain of being a new mum as my six-month-old daughter was often crying, and I lost my patience with her. This really got me down and made me feel like I was an awful mother. So the next day, even though I had no headache, I took another 'solpie' (as I started to refer to them) hoping it would help me cope. It worked. My mood brightened and I felt more love for my baby. The next day I took another tablet when my daughter was playing up, and then another the next day. The pills were my secret savour from the challenges of motherhood. But within a few weeks, one tablet wasn't having the same effect, so I took two at a time. Before long, I was on three, and then in the space of three months, I was taking four at a time. I knew it could be wrecking my liver, but that wasn't enough to stop me taking them.'

'When I used up my husband's pills I went to the doctor to get some of my own, telling him how it helped my headaches. That was the start of the lying.'

'I can't yet face up to a day without solpies. When I take them, I feel more confident and less worried about what other people may say or think, so I fool myself into thinking the addiction is good for me. I have never had any other addiction and it seems really stupid to admit that I'm addicted to painkillers. My husband has been very understanding about it and tries to take some of the pressures off me with the housework and childcare, but I still know I've let him down. I never thought I would be in this position as I never thought it was everyday people like myself who became addicts, but obviously I was wrong.'





The gambler

Tony, 35, hated his office job but had been unable to find a better alternative, so stuck with it. He recently split up from a five-year relationship with his fiancée, so found himself at a low ebb. 'I thought I was lucky to have my own office, which left me largely undisturbed by my colleagues, until I got tempted by internet gambling sites,' Tony explains. 'I got lucky early on, winning over £1,000 in the first month. I found it depressing going back to my flat, where I was living alone, so I decided to join a local casino. I was playing poker, blackjack and roulette over the internet during the day and going to the casino in the evening, and for several months, I was holding my own.'

'Gambling gave me the buzz the rest of my life seemed to be missing. I earned a reasonably good salary and had some savings put away in an ISA. Then I lost more than £3,000 in a matter of days. I was shocked, but decided I'd cash in my ISA, convinced I'd make good the loss with more gambling. My days were occupied with thoughts of how I was going to get lucky again, but, all too predictably, I lost all my savings in a matter of days. I didn't seem to understand the scale of the problem I was facing and fantasised about how I'd get lucky and everything would be all right again.'

It was at this point that things really deteriorated. I asked my parents for money, lying to them that my car needed major work doing to it. I justified the lying by telling myself I would give up once I won back the money, and would somehow repay them. By this stage, I was deeply unhappy and having suicidal thoughts. Never before in my life, had I been so low.

I went to see my GP but he just offered me anti-depressants. I wasn't ready to go down that road, so I did some research and was attracted to the logic of the Human Givens approach, which focuses on helping clients identify unmet physical and emotional needs and assist them to meet those needs by activating their own natural resources in new ways, and found a local counsellor from a website (see right). At the first session, the counsellor established that I had no remaining positive emotions about gambling. He gave me some strategies to help me stop, including an exercise where my addictive side has a debate with my non-addictive self. We worked out practical ways to change my life so I could get my emotional needs in healthier ways. It didn't take long before I woke up from a bad nightmare that left me sorely in debt.'

The food addict

For most of his life, Andy Back, 48, from Brighton, was a 'happy fat bloke', as he explains: 'Unlike the alcoholic or junkie who gets miserable at certain parts of the cycle, I was happy when anticipating a meal, happy while eating and happy when full up. But deep down I was lonely and ashamed of the size I had become.'

'A big part of every day was given up to dwelling on food – planning it, buying it, cooking it, eating it and working out when I could have more of it. There were also rituals of consumption – vegetables first, then potatoes and finally the meat. One friend laughed at my approach but I knew that there might be a couple of empty, foodless hours before I ate again, so I wanted to finish my lunch with the best bits to see me through.'

'I'd tried a range of diets, but "eating less and exercising more" was always a non-starter for me. Any progress was so painfully slow that I lacked the willpower to stick at it more than a morning.'

'Ironically, it was my fear of needles that finally provoked me to do something about my weight. At 23st 12lb, my blood sugar levels were going through the roof, and when even the highest dose of diabetes pills wasn't enough to keep them under control my doctor told me I'd need to be moved onto insulin injections. I hated the blood test pinprick, so how in the world would I cope with injecting myself? I was told that the only way to avoid the injections was to lose weight.'

'I was sitting in the waiting room of the eye hospital, my eyes suffering from thick sugar-laden blood forcing its way through tiny capillaries in my retinas, when I noticed a copy of *LighterLife* magazine. Their approach appealed to

me because during the weight-loss stage of the Programme you replace normal food with nutritionally balanced Foodpacks. Making sensible choices about food type, quantity and timing was where I always went wrong so it was great not to have to think about it.'

'Ninety per cent of the benefit to me of the LighterLife Programme was the cognitive behavioral therapy – the way my head was changed, not just my belly. After eight months on the Programme I may look like half the man I used to be at 12st 8lb, but I feel like twice the man I was. I'm in control. Now I understand why I ate, I can find an alternative way to deal with the emotions, rather than burying my head in the trough. As my confidence and self-esteem rose, I substituted those good feelings, for the good feelings stuffing my face used to give me. It felt good to be focused and successful – and those feelings are addictive in a helpful way. **life**



For more help and information

- To find out about Human Givens or to find a practitioner log on to www.hgi.org.uk
- Drinkline offers confidential advice about drinking, 9.00am to 11.00pm, Monday to Friday on 0800 917 8282
- A useful website for those dependent on painkillers is www.solpadeinehelp.org.uk
- GamCare provides information for gamblers and their families. Call 0845 600 0133, or visit www.gamcare.org.uk
- To find out more about the LighterLife Programme call 08700 664747 or visit www.lighterlife.com