



Searching for Spirit

When bound by the grip of addiction,
belief in a higher power can lead a person
from a life of chaos, fear and isolation to
one of connection, freedom and love

By Tammy Mastroberte



Not everyone who tries cocaine gets hooked. Not every college student who drinks too much at a party becomes an alcoholic. And not everyone who plays a hand of poker and wins, continues to play until his money, house and car are all lost.

So what's the secret to avoiding the fall?

What is it that turns a casual drinker into an alcoholic, or takes a person from an occasional cigarette to multiple packs a day? Where does the impulse to steal, gamble or overspend come from? And when does food become more than fuel and nourishment for the body?

"Addiction often comes from a hole in the soul or a spiritual gap," said Alexandre Laudet, Ph.D. and director of the Center for the Study of Addictions Recovery at The National Development Research Institutes in New York. "Alcoholics Anonymous calls addiction a 'spiritual malady.' I think the root element is an absence of meaning and purpose."

Through her studies on recovery from drug addiction, Laudet and colleague William White, M.A., senior research consultant at Chestnut Health Systems, found that formerly drug dependent individuals with a higher degree of spirituality are less likely to return to using alcohol and other drugs. There is also research in the general population showing that people with higher levels of religious or spiritual beliefs are less likely to use drugs or alcohol, and those who drink generally drink less. When surveying recovering addicts, the colleagues also discovered those individuals with higher scores on measures of spirituality are more likely to remain abstinent than those who had lower scores.

"When you look at people with drug and alcohol problems, they don't like themselves very much, and are not comfortable in their own skin," said Laudet. "If you don't like yourself, and you don't know why you are here, you will continually want to feel better."

But addiction stretches farther than drugs and

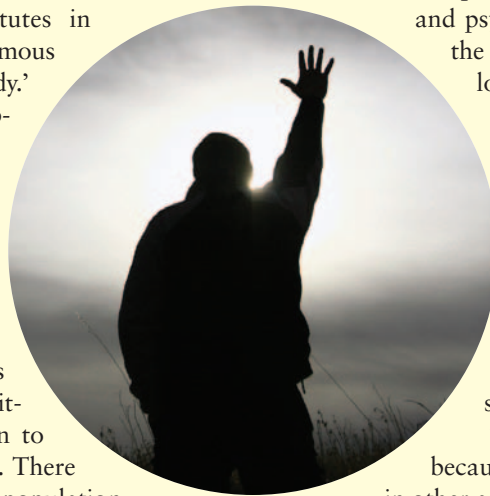
alcohol. While it's classified as having a physiological component where the body becomes dependent on a substance, there is also a psychological component to addiction, and in some cases, it is not the substance but the behavior that becomes addictive. This is particularly true in kleptomania, compulsive shopping and eating disorders.

A person may have a feeling of elation when he or she steals something and gets away with it, and then it becomes an endless quest to get that feeling back, explained Diane Zicarelli, director and psychotherapist at The Center for the Treatment of Eating Disorders, located in Livingston, N.J., who also works with clients suffering from depression and anxiety.

In the case of eating disorders, the addictive component is the behavior — whether restricting food as with anorexia, purging as with bulimia, or binge eating — the behavior is usually serving some purpose, she said.

"An anorexic is controlling food because his or her life is out of control in other areas. Others are looking to mask whatever emotions they are afraid of confronting," Zicarelli explained. "But no matter what, it tends to come from a void that people have not identified, and they begin to fill it up with physical, tangible things, when it is actually an emotional void."

When it is broken down, addiction is about the avoidance of pain and the seeking of pleasure, said Bill Urell, who has a masters in addiction counseling and practices at a residential, in-patient treatment center in Florida. "It's a disease of isolation. Spirituality helps because it is about connection and reconnection. It's about changing from isolation to connection."





Scientists and researchers continue to study the cause, prevention and recovery aspects of addiction, and while the jury is still out on whether or not genetics play a role, many believe it won't be long before a connection between the two is uncovered.

"Some interesting studies have been done in regards to drugs, alcohol and eating disorders using identical twins, and while the genetic components are still inconclusive, some have found that if one twin develops anorexia, the other is likely to develop the same eating disorder," Zicarelli explained. "I think they will eventually find a genetic link."

However, genetics doesn't necessarily mean someone will develop an addiction. "It just means they have a switch that is susceptible to being turned on in certain circumstances," Laudet said.

If children grow up with parents who are alcoholics or drug addicts, they may be more likely to develop a problem, she explained, but environment plays a role as well. "We look at people around us to see what they are doing," Laudet said.

Ultimately, the addict is looking for a way to fill themselves — creating isolation, although longing for connection — and the missing component is meaning, purpose, and often a higher power.

"Spirituality is the key to quality of life. I tell people, 'It wasn't a 12-step program that got me sober — it's what kept me sober.' Once I became abstinent, I knew I needed more," said Urell. "Spirituality brings the texture and color into your life, and for the people stuck in addiction, or a world where there is only black and white, this is mind blowing."

12 SPIRITUAL STEPS

When overcoming addiction, the first step is abstinence. But when the substance or behavior is taken away, it must be replaced with healthy coping skills, as well as a feeling of meaning or purpose, to fill

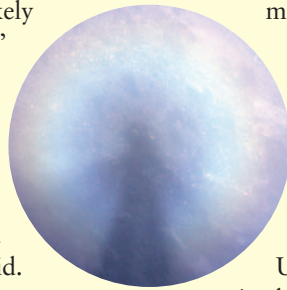
the void left behind. This is the approach introduced by 12-step programs such as Alcoholics Anonymous (AA).

"Scientific studies prove that a person's self efficacy highly correlates to the success rate, and groups like AA develop self efficacy and give a large support system to recovery, along with coping skills. These programs are proven to have better outcomes," said Urell. "The concept of spirituality was brought in by the 12-step programs and AA, but they are greatly misunderstood by people who have not gone into the program, which defines spirituality as that which brings about change sufficient enough to maintain recovery."

Addiction puts people into a double bind where the mind wants to use or engage in the addictive behavior, but the body says, 'no, you can't do this anymore,'

Urell explained. However, the solution isn't in the mind or the body.

"It is in the spiritual. The last step of the 12-step program is where you have a spiritual awakening,



"Spirituality brings the texture and color into your life, and for the people stuck in addiction, or a world where there is only black and white, this is mind blowing." — Bill Urell, Addiction Counselor

and by going through all the steps, the person will have changed. In order to move from one step to another, you have to change, and you are learning basic spiritual principles," he said.

Additionally, a person doesn't have to believe in God or a higher power to start with a 12-step program, Laudet explained. Beliefs can be acquired over time. "One of the key things that the 12-step program provides is meaning. It gives people self efficacy and self-confidence that they are worthy individuals. Because treatment is so short in America, you need to give people the tools, strategies and the support resources to come to the conclusion that they can say no," she said.

These skills include communication, relationship building, and dealing with and identifying

emotions. “Addicts become used to isolation and they shut down. But most important, they are terrible at emotions, feelings and relationships. Most people in an addiction can’t even identify a feeling,” said Urell. Addicts need to learn how to effectively work with feelings and emotions. The ability to handle them is what determines the quality of relationships, he explained.

“Addiction is a self-centered disease, and if you are self-centered in the extreme, how are you going to have a relationship?” he asked.

While there are programs for people who are not comfortable with the spiritual aspect of 12-step options, they are small and their effectiveness has not been evaluated, Laudet noted. “There is an



enormous body of research data that shows going to 12-step programs on a continuous basis, once a week or more, significantly enhances your likelihood of staying sober,” she said. “Spirituality plays a role in that because it develops meaning and purpose, and it also develops service and the ability to help others. That is where sponsoring comes in and sponsors become a role model for someone, which is very good for self esteem.”

A lot of people who have suffered from an addiction often go on to help others with the same problem, and if asked why, they say it gives

meaning to their experience, Laudet said.

WHEN FOOD BECOMES AN ISSUE

Dealing with eating disorders is vastly different than drugs, alcohol or gambling, because a person can’t remove food from their life — abstinence is not a possibility. For this reason, many who suffer from other addictions and go on to battle an eating disorder find that it is the hardest to tackle, said Zicarelli.

With eating disorders, the behavior is the addictive component, which is learned from a very young age. What children learn at the dinner table about food can have an effect on their thoughts and feelings concerning it, Zicarelli explained. It is in the home where a person’s relationship with food develops — either a healthy one where food is looked at as nourishment, or an unhealthy one where food becomes an obsession, comfort or something to fear.

“It is a learned behavior — when you are little, you are rewarded with an ice cream cone, or if you fall and hurt yourself, your mom gives you a cookie,” she said.

But the addictive aspects start off slowly, and can go unnoticed at first, even to the person engaging in the behavior. “It starts off slowly and innocently, where there is a void in someone that makes them lean toward and connect with food because food is the one thing that is always there for them,” Zicarelli said. “There is something going on first

that is not tapped into, and the next thing you know, a person very innocently begins to control food.”

While anorexia is life-threatening and becomes a noticeable problem rather quickly, other eating disorders can go unnoticed for quite some time. “I once had a woman who was a binge eater, and she was that way from when she was a junior in high school. It went unnoticed because she was very active in sports, and then when she graduated from college, she started to gain weight. Her binging was no worse than before, but it started to become distressing,” Zicarelli said.



For many, it is the onset of physical changes that lead them to deal with the problem. But ultimately, until it begins affecting a person's life and his or her ability to function on a daily basis, it is often not perceived as an issue.

"I know someone who adopted a baby and has pictures of the biological mother, who is rail thin, but this baby is obese. The adoptive mother has a compulsive eating problem and she gives the baby food constantly, so to the baby, this is normal," Zicarelli relayed. "Right now, there may not be an issue, but when the baby turns into a 12-year-old who is made fun of, then the emotions start coming into play, and the behavior becomes a problem."

Often people suffering from eating disorders become out of touch with themselves and their surroundings, and a lost sense of self or low self esteem follows. "Why would somebody destroy their body if they really loved themselves?" Zicarelli asked. "You need to uncover the void and replace it with something healthy. If you are going to take away a person's addiction, you have to put something in its place."

This is where spirituality can play a major role — connecting people not only to a higher power, but also to other people around them. "It allows people to get in touch with themselves again, and look to something greater to help get through it. It helps them to know they are not alone in the recovery process," Zicarelli said.

While some clients will bring up the topic of spirituality, she will also introduce the topic on occasion, based on what someone says in therapy sessions. "Recovery has to be more than just abstaining from a substance or a behavior," she said. "And it has to be more than just talking to a therapist."

And while the solution to obesity and other weight issues for most people in America is to diet, this is not the best answer, according to Zicarelli. "We have a \$40 billion diet industry, and it is that high because people are not successful on these

diets. A person has to change their relationship with food. They need to deal with their underlying issues. I don't think any diet that has restriction works. When a person begins a diet, they are not giving their body the nutrients it requires to function properly, so they alter its chemistry, which can lead to depressive episodes, impaired judgment and an inability to think clearly, and these only



enhance addictive behaviors," she said, adding people need to view food as a lifestyle, where the goal is not overeating or deprivation.

PLAYING HOPSCOTCH

Often, however, a person will conquer a particular addiction, only to find he or she has picked up another bad habit in its place. Experts call this "hopscotching," coining the phrase from the childhood game where jumping from one square to another, eventually reaches a goal. But this route doesn't work with addiction.

"A good way to visualize it is [imagine] driving down a highway on a bus called addiction. There are a lot of seats on the bus — cocaine, alcohol, Xanax, sex — and the solution is not to keep changing seats, but to get off the bus," said Urell. "If you are jumping from one thing to another, then



you haven't addressed the underlying issue."

In Laudet's research, she often asks people how they got sober, and the response always is they have found meaning or purpose in their life, or in the fact that they went through the addiction. "Until people find a satisfactory answer, they can stop using drugs or alcohol, but they will have an unhealthy dependence on something. That is where you see the substitution of addictions or addictive behaviors," she explained.

Spirituality is the ideal antidote to addiction. It connects people to a power higher than themselves; connects them to their inner and true self; and most of all, it fills the emptiness inside that cries out for

connection, love, purpose and hope.

"People who become involved in addiction just gave up on the normal human process too quickly," Urell noted. "Part of growing up is finding your passion, and the people who suffer from addiction have this hole in their soul and the feeling of being alone in a crowd. They didn't find — or weren't quick enough to find — the thing that floats their boat. They gave up on finding what makes them tick. Spirituality challenges us to find what we are really good at, what we enjoy, and it teaches us to share it with the world. People in addiction — they don't know it, but they just gave up too early." EE

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7 TIPS FOR SPIRITUALITY

Making a Connection

Taken from his years of experience as an addiction counselor at a residential treatment center in Florida, Bill Urell shares tips for achieving recovery from addiction and a spiritual connection

Although these tips for spirituality came about as the result of work done with people in addiction recovery, the concepts are applicable to almost everyone.

The question is often asked, “what can I do to improve my spirituality?”

Addiction can be viewed as a disease of isolation, becoming disconnected to life. Addiction recovery and spirituality can be viewed as the process of becoming connected. The more connections we have in life, the greater the chance of coming into harmony with our surroundings.

There are basically four areas or types of relationships in life that we need to work on when becoming connected:

- ✓ Positive spirituality may be viewed as having a healthy relationship and positive self-esteem.
- ✓ There is the relationship you may have, or want to develop, with whatever form of higher power is right for you. It can be God, nature or a force of the Universe. It is up to you.
- ✓ Develop healthy connections or spirituality through relationships with family.
- ✓ Lastly is the area that is kind of a catchall: community. This includes casual relationships, work, social situations, etc.

Here are seven tips for spirituality, which are very concrete areas for development. Note: it is very important to work in each area and set up specific goals that are measurable and achievable. Instead of saying “I will start meditating,” say “I will spend 10 minutes before breakfast and 10 minutes after dinner

alone reading the meditation of the day.”

1. Use personal prayer and/or meditation. This is quiet time to start to develop time for yourself and to assess how things are going in your life.

2. Spend time in groups. This could be through attending a worship service, singing in a choir, acting in a play or any group with positive interaction and direction. This enhances our ability to develop relationships with other people.

3. Spend time learning. Grow your mind. This could involve taking a few classes at the community college, book study groups, self-help or mental health material.

4. Take time for yourself. Plan a quiet day just for you, away from family and work. Indulge yourself in quiet. There are many retreat areas, both religious and non-religious, where you can find peaceful surroundings for recharging yourself.

5. Physical fitness and proper diet. There is a very satisfying feeling that comes from taking care of your body. Get in shape to be the best person you can be.

6. Recreation. Partake in some activity just for sheer fun. Explore hobbies, sports, whatever floats your boat, but make time for it. Do not plan to “get around to it someday.” Just do it.

7. Be of service. Engage in volunteer work or random acts of kindness. It really does feel good and builds self-esteem to help someone with no thought of reward. This is a cosmic win-win situation.

I hope that gives you some inspiration about how to improve your relationships with yourself and others. The key thing is to take action.

EE

