

The Civilization Affect: from natural to neurotic
Overcoming addiction in an insane society.

Before I begin I would like to thank everyone at Turtle Creek Manor for letting me spend my summer practicum (internship) helping those who are dual diagnosed with chemical dependencies and mental imbalances. This essay is a collection of the concept of addiction I created through the experiences I had with all the amazing people who shared their lives with me. Please understand that what I have written are my own theories and not necessarily the views shared by the staff at Turtle Creek Manor.

Many of us consider addiction a disease, a virus affecting the mind and body.

What I find fascinating is, if an addiction to a drug, be it alcohol, methamphetamine, or crack, is considered an illness or a disease, our society has a very funny way of dealing with it. I think it's because we don't really understand, or want to understand, what addiction is. Unfortunately, as with most things our society doesn't understand, we often handle it in a way that makes it worse. With addicts we usually cover their addiction with a band-aid in the hopes that they will become productive members of our society. This, of course, does not cure their addiction, but at least they can pay taxes.

My reason for writing this is to bring together my own thoughts about what it means to be an addict, and then offer my own suggestions on how we can address the cause of the addiction instead of just focusing on the addiction, which is just a symptom of a much deeper issue. First, I would like to look at what an addict is, or actually what an addict isn't. Now, a definition is something we create so we can understand something. So, the first thing we should ask our selves is, how we defined an addict. Well, the government, in its infinite wisdom, helped many of us define an addict as a criminal, someone we should avoid at all cost, like a plague. We were taught to walk away if they got too close, keep our change to ourselves, and just say, "No". Believed to be dangerous,

lost, and possibly evil, addicts were to be treated as if their addiction could be passed on to us like a contagious disease. It is this generalization that prevents us from truly understanding the person behind the addiction, because they are not an “addict”, they are experiencing something that has created an addiction.

The problem with this archaic view of addiction is that, when someone becomes addicted to something, they may see themselves in the same way they were taught to see other addicts. If they were taught to see an addict in a negative way, then they will see themselves in the same way. Or they may not see themselves as an addict because they don't match up to the definition they created for it. As a consequence, they may avoid telling other people, or seeking help for their addiction, because they are afraid others will judge them as harshly as they are judging themselves.

Self-judgment and self-persecution seem to go hand and hand with addiction. My theory is that self-judgment and self-persecution stem from a basic underlying fear of being rejected and alone. This fear is usually created at an early age when someone teaches us that, if we fall behind in any way, we run the risk of loosing the game of life. Loosing the game of life means dying alone, poor, and miserable. If we become addicted, and subscribe to the negative view of addiction, we may begin to fear that, if anyone finds out, we will be cast out of our society and left behind along the road of progress.

As I have shown in my other writings, this undercurrent of fear stems from the confusion of being a captive species. We are animals living in captivity, outside of nature, and inside a habitat that is not designed to promote positive mental health. In fact, it seems to create the very opposite, yet we are brought up believing the conditions we live in are the natural way of things. So, when we begin to stumble and fall we often

believe it is a reflection of our self-worth instead of a symptom caused by our inability to assimilate into a very complex and highly contradictory social system that is as far from a natural state of being as a chimpanzee watching television while eating a package of corn nuts.

So, looking at our life this way, it seems natural that we could have a difficult time living it, and not because of some cosmic chess game between good and evil. We simply were not mentally or physically created to live in captivity, which gives us a clearer understanding of what we are up against when attempting to step out of an addiction. We are up against something that is both mental and biological. The mental imbalance stems from our belief system, which is influenced by our past, our society, our religion, and whatever else we use to create our perception of reality. The biological imbalances affect our glandular, muscular, neurological, and other body systems. When we become imbalanced, everything is affected because everything in our body is connected and dependent on each other.

Now, for over forty years genetics has been added to the list of possible causes for addiction. Since there has never been any actual concrete, undisputable, proof that addiction is passed through our genes, I have decided not to involve genetics in the theories I present in this essay. Though many of us get a warm fuzzy feeling by believing our destiny is greatly influenced by our genetics, it is my thought that, if our genes were not designed for our captive lifestyle, and addiction is caused by our captivity, then addiction must be “created”.

So the question is, “how is addiction created?”

Well, if an addict is someone who is using a substance to permanently change their state of mind, then it seems likely that an addiction is somehow linked to their perception of reality and their perception of themselves. For example, due to the lineage of insanity inherited by our society from its forefathers, many of us created a negative perception of ourselves based on someone else's understanding of reality. Since reality is subjective, and interpreted differently by each of us, then it would seem foolish to create an interpretation of ourselves based on what someone else thinks. For all we know that person could be completely insane. Unfortunately, as children, we are not taught to question, we are taught to listen and absorb... which, coincidentally, is exactly what our mind is designed to do at that age.

During middle childhood, our mind evolved enough to think concretely. Piaget believed this stage was extremely important during cognitive development and called it the, "concrete operational stage" (Berger, 2005). During this stage our mind took in information that was visible or tangible so that it could begin to reason logically. While this was a great help to us when we were trying to learn how to survive in the wild without being eaten by larger animals, it caused confusion in a world built more on abstract concepts like morality, social structure, and religion. For example, we were taught the difference between bad and good. If we involved ourselves in something bad, then we were bad. If we involved ourselves in something good, then we were good. This was usually enforced with punishment or reward to condition us into accepting whatever it was that we were being taught. I can see two problems with this. First, the people teaching us were brought up in the same confusing environment in which they are conditioning us to live. Second, since we were unable to think abstractly until our

adolescent years (Berger, 2005), then it was impossible for us to understand the abstract concepts that seem to have shaped our society. Because of this we were conditioned like dogs to adhere to the concepts of good and bad whether we understand them or not. It was through our conditioning that we created our perception of reality. I could go into greater detail on this, but for the purposes of this essay I feel it only necessary to point out that we created a concrete perception of the world using the mind of a child, and that it is in this world that many of us still live.

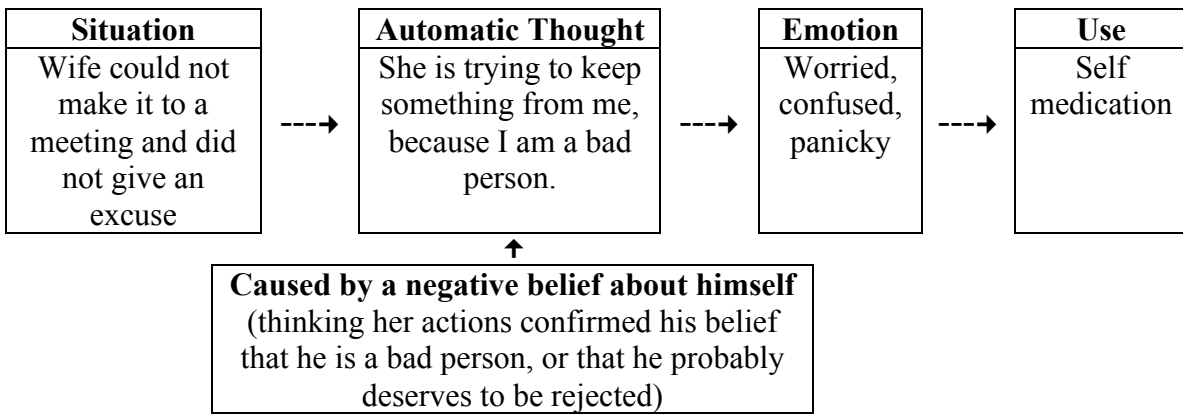
I also want to point out that our actions as children were the result of our conditioning, not necessarily of our ability to understand the rationale behind it. Therefore, we were neither “good” children or “bad” children, we were just “children”, children who were being conditioned to think and behave in a way that was susceptible to those who were conditioning them. Unfortunately, when we did something that went against what was considered acceptable, we were labeled as bad. Many of us used this label to create the foundation of our self-perception, which ultimately affected our ability to interact in the world outside our mind.

What does this mean to an addict?

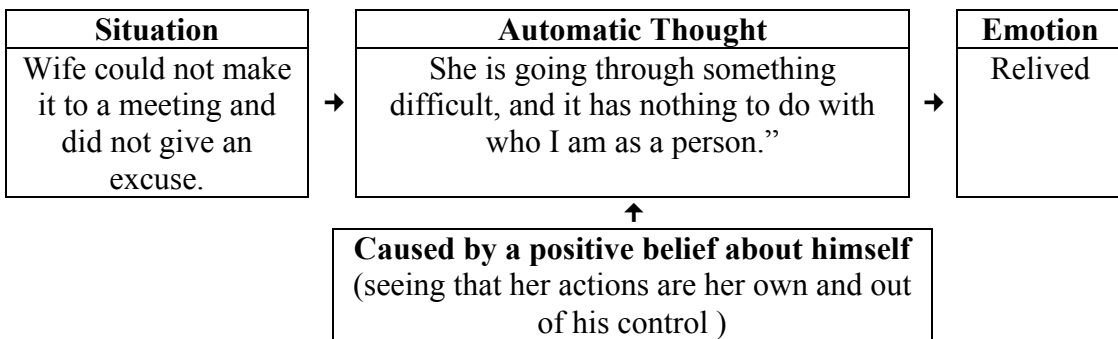
If an addict is someone who is trying to chemically change their experience of reality then it is possible they created a negative core belief about themselves that inhibits them from processing reality in a positive way. For example, John is in rehab, and asks his wife to join him for a meeting in which the families of those in his rehabilitation program can ask questions and participate in their recovery. His wife tells him she can't go. He asks why. She says it is because of something she has planned. He asks if it has something to do with their children. She says, “yes”. Afterward, he hangs up the phone

thinking that she is keeping something from him, perhaps she doesn't want to see him, or maybe wants to divorce him. As these thoughts go through his mind he becomes angry, frustrated, and worried, making him want to self-medicate or "use". What John may not realize is that his desire to use a drug is not caused by the situation, but his thought about the situation. He wants to medicate his thoughts. So his addiction is just a symptom of negative thinking. Negative thinking is caused by a negative self-perception. Therefore, by changing his perception of himself, he changes his thoughts, which changes his emotions to ones that are not triggers for self-medication.

John's old thought:



John's thought when replaced with a more positive self-image:



By changing his thoughts he changes the emotion. This seems very simple, but our core belief usually doesn't change just because someone tells us we should improve our self-image. We've been stuck with this image for years, it has infected every aspect of our mind, and most of us never even think to question it.

We also never think to question the emotions we express. For example, emotions such as anger, guilt, and worry are not necessary for our survival. In fact, they are detrimental to our mental and physical health. If these emotions are not required for our survival, why are they being passed down to us by the older generations? My thought is that the older generations are simply passing down what was passed down to them. Somewhere during our evolution we created these emotions, but that does not mean it was necessarily a good thing. Human beings have created a lot of things that are unhealthy like processed food, jogging, and diet soda. Because anger and worry are so ingrained in our social consciousness, we continue teaching them to our children while at the same time researching how to cope with them.

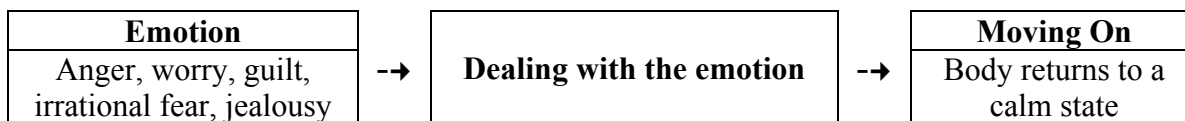
Whether we like it or not, anger, worry, and guilt exist. They are part of the collective way humans express themselves. But, someone cannot make us feel angry, worried, or guilty. The only way these emotions can be created is if our mind creates a chemical composition of polypeptides and releases them into our nervous system where they cause changes in our body. The chemicals created for anger, guilt, and worry are toxic. In our mind they infect our thoughts causing us to become irrational, basically short circuiting our ability to rationalize a situation with any kind of common sense. As the chemicals travel into our body, they affect millions of cells in our circulatory, digestive, muscular, and other body systems. After the chemicals are created and

dispersed, our body spends an exorbitant amount of time and energy bringing us back to a state of homeostasis, or balance. Unfortunately by the time we calm ourselves, if we calm ourselves, some damage has already been done to our body and we find ourselves in a state of repair.

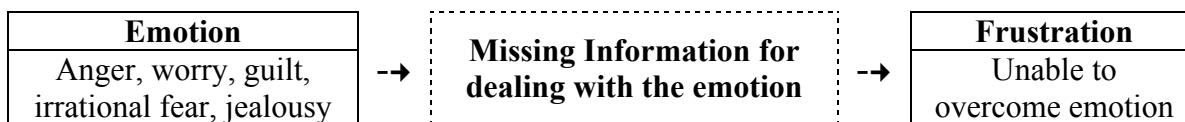
Now, these emotions are different from the ones we create during fight or flight. The fight or flight emotions are created during episode of rational fear. They are fast necessary, and natural to our survival. Yelling at someone because they failed to bring the dinner check in a timely manor does not insure our survival. It is simply an expression of agitation in the hopes of getting a response. While this may make us feel vindicated, it sets an addict up for relapse since negative emotions are a trigger for self-medication.

This presents another problem with negative emotions. Many of those who teach us negative emotions do not teach us an adequate way to deal with them. When we were children we may have watched our care givers become enraged, angered, worried, or some other form of upsetting emotion and then leave, smoke, drink, or something else that did not teach us how to overcome our emotions and move on. For example, when our mother or father got angry or worried they may have calmed themselves by having a cigarette. So, not only did we learn the emotion, but we also did not learn how to deal with it. This absence of information is ultimately what can predispose someone to become an addict later in life. If we did not learn how to deal with negative emotions, then experimented with alcohol or other drugs, our mind may begin to use these substances to fill in the gap. It may not even be drugs, it could be gambling, shopping, sex, anything that distracts us from our present state of mind.

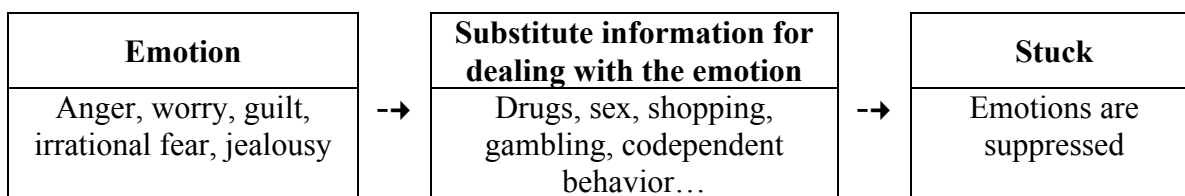
Normal Progression of an emotion with training:



Progression of emotion without training:



Progression of emotion in addiction:

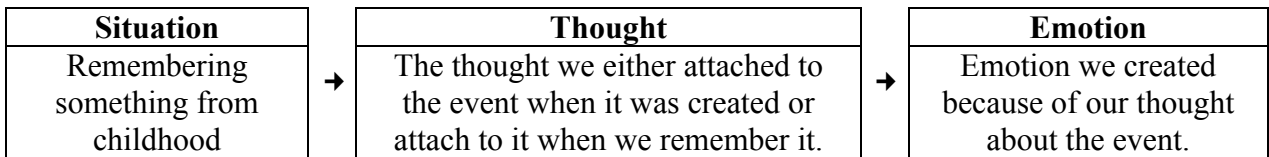


So, in order to fill in that gap we need to learn how to deal with the emotion or we risk becoming slaves to whatever distracts us from them. This is, of course, if we decide to continue using emotions that are unnecessary for our survival. It would be more beneficial to let go of our negative emotions. As I pointed out earlier, the best way to overcome negative emotions is to change our thoughts. To change our thoughts we must change our core belief. To change our core belief we must figure out how we created it. I believe this the critical step for someone to take if they eventually want to be “recovered”.

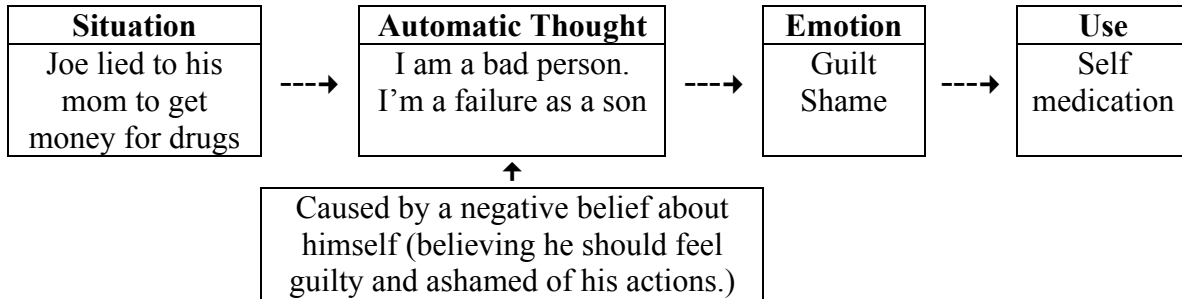
Another step in recovery is understanding that the past and the future do not exist. This is a very hard concept for us to understand. When we were children we were presented with the “timeline theory”. This timeline, consisting of a past, present, and future provides us with an understanding of where we have been, where we are, and

where we are going. Unfortunately this theory comes with a few flaws. First, the past does not exist. We may think it does, but doesn't. The past is something we create in our mind. This means the past is in our head, a conglomeration of neurological reactions involving molecules, nerve cells, calcium, and a lot of others things thrown together to create a holding place for something we experienced. Because it is in our mind, we have the ability to "remember", meaning we can activate our memories using electrical stimulation, more calcium, and a lot of other complex scientific theory I don't really want to take the time to go into.

So, the past is in our mind, it doesn't exist in reality, which means activating our memories shouldn't affect us in the present. Unfortunately, the mind doesn't store a memory without a thought attached to it. This means, when we "remember", we also recreate our thought about the memory, which can then create an emotion.



If our thought about the memory is negative, then we create a negative emotion. If these negative emotions are triggers for self-medication, and the past doesn't exist, then we are creating triggers for something that doesn't exist. For example, Joe lied to his mom several months ago so she would give him money. He then used that money for drugs. Joe is now in a rehabilitation clinic and feels guilty for what he did. His guilt is triggering him to want to self-medicate.



Instead of focusing on the present moment, Joe is focusing on his memories, creating an emotion for something that doesn't exist. Because of this he is stuck in his mind and unable to move forward. Don Miguel Ruiz (1997), in his book "The Four Agreements", said "The human is the only animal that pays a thousand times for the same mistake (p. 12). We are not our past. We may find ourselves experiencing consequences created by things we did in our past, but that does not mean we need to beat ourselves up over something that no longer exists. No matter how sad, horrifying, unhealthy, unhappy, or abusive our past may have been, the simple fact is it no longer exists. Millions of people are living in their past, which means they are living in their mind.

The second flaw with the timeline theory is that the future doesn't exist either. The future is a concept we created as children, a fantasy about what may happen to us as we get older, whether it be about something thirty minutes or thirty years from now. Four problems stand out to me when we create a future for ourselves. First, as I mentioned earlier, when we create an emotion, our brain, more specifically our hypothalamus, creates polypeptides that surge through our body system changing the molecular structure of our cells. Creating an emotion affects our entire body from our head to our feet and from our skin to our bones. Since negative emotions are extremely toxic to our system, and serve as triggers to those who are overcoming an addiction, we can see why it is so

easy for someone to relapse if they are constantly bombarding themselves with negative thoughts. If we imagine a negative future, and begin reacting as if this future is actually going to happen, our mind creates negative emotions to correspond with what we are imagining like anger, fear, worry, anxiety, sadness, or loss. This means our body is physically reacting to our fantasies as if they exist, trapping us in our mind while we think about where we may be headed instead of concentrating on where we are.

The second problem I see with creating a future is that, if we are always focusing on the future, we may find it very difficult to participate in the present. For example, Westerners are very goal orientated; our entire lives are structured around goals. This is likely because a lot of money can be earned by goal making. We use the money we make to pay for what we believe is needed for our survival, which allows us to go out and make more goals. Because of this we spend a great deal of time inside our mind thinking about what might happen instead of what is happening.

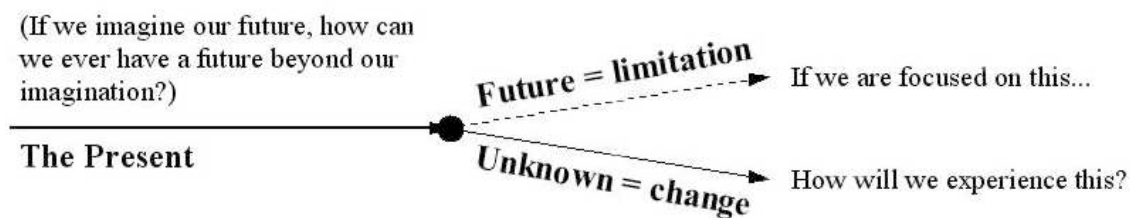
We may find it especially difficult to enjoy the present if we believe our life will begin once we achieve our goals. For example, Joe has decided to use Alcoholics Anonymous as a platform to build his recovery. Alcoholics Anonymous built its theory of recovery using a twelve-step program. Joe has decided that his goal is to complete these twelve steps. He believes this goal, this future, is the key to his survival. Unfortunately, he becomes so obsessed with achieving this goal, and so afraid of what may happen if he doesn't, that he jumps from one step to the next as quickly as possible in an effort to finish. What he doesn't realize is that finishing the twelve steps is not what's important, what's important is allowing each step to change his pattern of thinking. Joe cannot change his pattern of thinking, cannot focus on his recovery, if he is always fixated on the

future. Only by living in the present moment can Joe's future become something he's never created: someone who has recovered.

This brings me to the third issue; since the future is created in our mind, then the future, like religion, requires belief for it to have any kind of affect on us. Without belief the future would not exist. Yet we treat the future as if it exists and, because of our belief in it, it affects us as if it is part of our reality. We've already seen how this affects us if we believe something negative is going to happen to us, but what about the futures we create that are taken away from us? Everyone of us who has ever lost a lover to divorce or death, or lost our job, or developed a crippling illness, or didn't become the person we thought we would be before our high school reunion knows what it is like to lose the future. It is a crippling experience because we have this vision in our mind of who we were going to be and where we were going, but when that fantasy is taken away, we find ourselves staring into something more terrifying than death, the unknown. Who am I? Where am I going? What do I do now? What is my purpose? Creating a future gave us those answers. Without our future we are left feeling empty, lost, anxious, scared, unable to move forward because we are in mourning for the fantasy we created in our mind. We are in mourning for something that never existed, yet it is affecting us as if it did. For someone who is trying to overcome an addiction, the emotions created by this feeling of loss can be a trigger for relapse. The irony is, if we are constantly mourning a future that never existed, then we may never move forward into a future we never imagined.

This moves us into the fourth issue I have with creating a future. Since our future is imagined with our mind, then it is limited to what our mind can imagine. If we are depressed, we imagine our future with a depressed mind. If we are suffering from an

addiction, we imagine a future with an addicted mind. There is absolutely no avoiding this because we are limited to what our mind can create. If we are unable to create a future beyond our imagination, how are we ever going to allow ourselves to move in a new direction? To move in a new direction we must let go of the future we created with the mind we are trying to change.



If our enjoyment of life and happiness is based on our ability to follow the future we created in our mind, and we are unable to experience exactly what we imagined, then we often treat ourselves like failures. Marriage, vocation, lifestyle, we place all of these fantasies in our head when we were children. When we were children, we imagined our future with the mind of a child. As adults, we often look back at what we imagined we would be and, if we fall short, we feel like failures. We find ourselves mourning a future that will never become a reality. We never think that, maybe, just maybe, there is something out there, something waiting for us beyond our imagination. Instead we stay stuck in our mind, stuck remembering our future, beating ourselves up for not becoming the person we thought we should be. This kind of behavior only prevents us from moving forward, and would be considered quite insane if it were not common practice for most westerners.

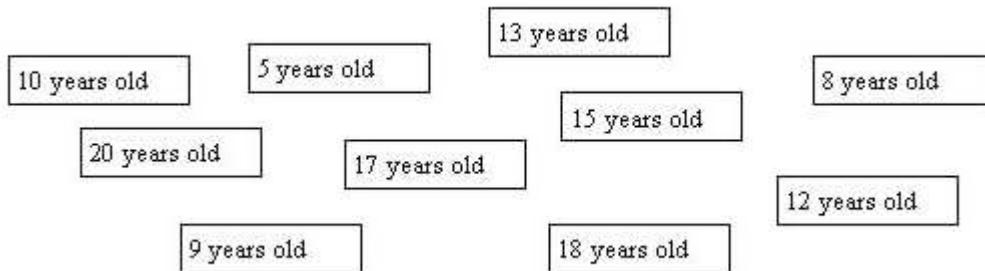
So, what does all of this mean for a person who is trying to overcome an addiction? Well, if Joe is in the middle of rehabilitation, and he is constantly thinking about what happened to him or what might happen to him, then he is lost inside his mind and unable to focus on his recovery. Not only are his thoughts polluting his body with negative chemicals that inhibit his ability to think rationally, they are creating triggers that may ultimately cause him to want to self-medicate. He is fixating on a past that doesn't exist and is either mourning for a future that never came to be or is creating a future using a mind that is trying to heal itself, which is like trying to fix a tool using the tool that needs to be fixed. What Joe doesn't realize is, by letting go of his past and allowing his present to create his future, he will eventually experience something his mind never imagined. Unfortunately, because he is unable to let go of his past and his future, he will most likely relapse after he leaves the rehabilitation center. Why? Because he is still lost inside his mind.

Millions upon millions of people are lost in their mind, living in their past, their future, or both. If their mind is unhealthy, and they are limited to the past and the future their mind is able to process, then they will be lost in an unhealthy mind. It is my belief that, in order to understand the cause of an addiction, we must get out of our mind and take a closer look at it to see what we have been living in. This is not always an easy task since a great number of us have what I call a "scattered mind". This is a mind with memories that are disconnected from each other. They exist separately, making it difficult to bring our thoughts together so that we may figure out how we created ourselves.

For example, when an addict is participating in a rehabilitation program, they are often asked to write an autobiography, a brief description of their life thus far. The

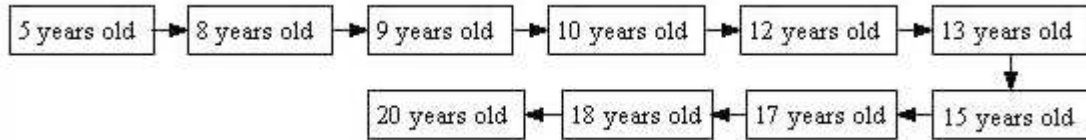
problem many of them experience in doing this is that their memories are disconnected. So, they will write down something that happened to them when they were twelve, then something that happened when they were fifteen, then eight, then ten, then five, and so on. It may look something like this:

A Scattered Mind



A scattered mind seems to be associated with someone who is chronically depressed, bi-polar, schizophrenic, or suffering from some kind of mental disorder. There are dozens of theories as to how these disorders are created, but it seems that the common theme is they have been through some form of trauma. A traumatized mind often protects us from having to think about the memories we created with negative emotions by severing their connections to the rest of our memories. Over time this creates a disconnected memory system, a scattered mind.

There are two reasons I believe we should create an autobiography while attempting to overcome an addiction. First, it gives us a chance to organize our memories so that they are more easily accessible.

An Unscattered Mind

Second, by organizing our thoughts we gain a clearer perception of how we came to be where we are today. We are given access to triggers for relapse. We are able to look inside our mind and see what created our need for self-medication. For example, as I mentioned at the beginning of this essay, many of us believed, and may still believe, that we were bad children. This is because we were told so by others, ourselves, or both. This belief created traumatic memories. As we grew up, we protected ourselves from the emotions associated with those memories by placing them in a box, labeling them “do not open”, and scattering them throughout our mind so we would never have to look at them again. Unfortunately, we never stopped believing we were bad children because we never opened the boxes as adults to see what actually happened.

Because of this our childhood perception of ourselves still affects us as adults. The only way to undo this is by opening the boxes. The easiest way to open the boxes is to create a timeline in our mind from as far back as we can remember to the present moment. This is not easy; our childhood memories still have the emotion we attached to them when they were created. But, by opening them, we can change the emotion associated with the memory by changing our thought about the situation. The best way to do this is by understanding that, when we created the memory, we thought we were bad children, when, in fact, we were not bad children, we were just children.

~~BAD~~ Children

By creating a timeline and organizing our thoughts, we can see how this belief affected our entire life. We may feel a bit foolish when we realize that our addiction was caused by a misperception we created during our childhood, but we can also feel relieved that, by understanding the cause of our symptom, we are closer to recovery.

Before I end this I would like to go over a few more concepts about recovery. First, one of the main causes of an addicted mind's inability to recover is fear. Fear is also the reason so many of us refuse to get help in the first place. Since we are afraid of being rejected, we may find ourselves living two lives, the life of an addict and the life we present as a cover up for our addiction. This dual existence becomes more difficult to maintain as we get deeper into our addiction creating an even greater need for self-medication. Because of this defense mechanism, it becomes more difficult to seek help because, not only do we have to admit to having an addiction, now we have to admit we have been manipulating our friends and family throughout our addiction. Because of this, the longer it takes us to get help because we're afraid of rejection, the more likely it is that we will be rejected.

The second issue concerns our physical health. As I mentioned earlier, the cause of addictive behavior is in our mind. Our mind is not limited to our thoughts; it also includes the biology that creates our thoughts. We are a biological system where millions of cells create an eco system that stares back at us when we look in the mirror. Since our mind is not disconnected from our body, and our body affects our thoughts, then it seems obvious that if we do not take care of our body then our mind will be unable to heal. How we take care of ourselves physically affects everything from our ability to think to how our cells reproduce. In this respect, we are very much like a plant, if we do not get the

nutrients we need, parts of us will eventually breakdown. A common theme with addicts who are in recovery is that they pour an unlimited amount of chemicals into their system to counter balance the difficulty they are having while adjusting to life without their addiction. I do not want to take the time to list all the side effects for caffeine, sugar, and processed foods, but they do affect the body negatively. If we are living in a negative brain and hope to get out of it, we must treat our body as a living organism. I'm not saying we should quit coffee, cola, sugar, and processed foods... actually, that's exactly what I am saying, but cutting back is a good start. Think of it like this, would you pour a can of Coke or cup of coffee on a sick plant? No, you would water it. Why should you treat yourself any different?

The third issue I would like to explore is our constant need to define ourselves. We define ourselves using our work; "I'm a computer programmer". We define ourselves by our religion; "I'm a Shintoist". We define ourselves using our sexuality; "I'm heterosexual". The problem with definitions is that they limit us to a small percentage of who we are. We are not our sexuality, we are not our religion, we are not our job, we are not our addiction, we are all of those things combined with everything else that creates us. What I find interesting is that, when many of us go into a rehabilitation program like Alcoholics Anonymous, we take the label, "addict" and attach it to us like it is our last name.

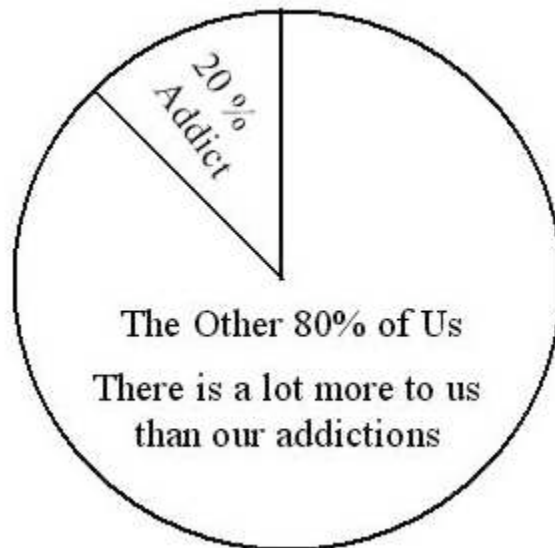
"I'm Bob Alcoholic Addict."

"I'm Amy Cocaine Addict Alcoholic"

"I'm John Methamphetamine Crack Heroine Alcoholic Addict"

"Hello Bob, Amy, and John."

Bob, Amy and John have decided to define themselves by their addiction. This is not uncommon, as we tend to define ourselves based on what we are focusing on. The problem is, if we are always focusing on our addiction, then we are only focusing on about twenty-percent of who we are. If we are only concentrating on twenty-percent of who we are, then we are missing out on the other eighty-percent.



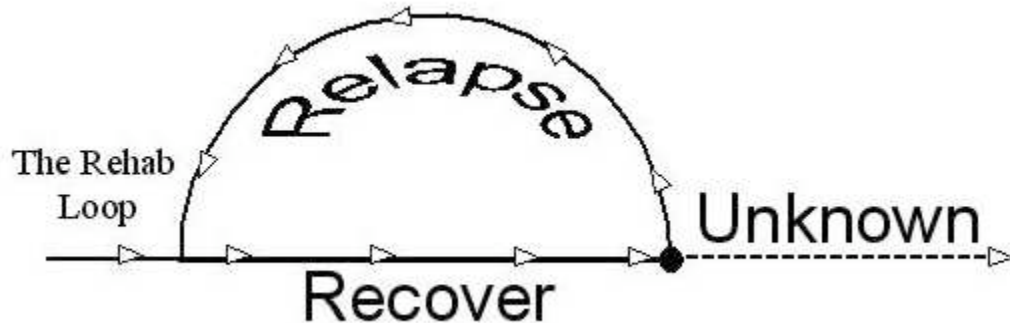
How are we ever going to break free of our addictions if we are always defining ourselves by them? If we define ourselves as an addict, then we are defining ourselves by our symptoms. We wouldn't walk around saying, "I'm George Cancer" or "I'm Stephanie Menstrual Cramps". Nothing depresses a sick person more than constantly focusing on their sickness. It stresses them out and can actually make them worse. I realize there is a phase an addict goes through where they admit they have a problem, but we are not our problem, therefore we should not define ourselves as such since it can cloud our mind and prevent us from moving forward.

Another issue with defining ourselves, and then using that definition to create our identity, is how it limits our ability to identify with others. We use our identity to seek out

attachments, or groups. These groups then give us a sense of belonging, security, and a foundation on which we can build our identity. Rehab programs like Alcoholics Anonymous create communities for those who have defined themselves as addicts. Many of us who belong to these groups feel connected to other members, we draw strength from each other, and begin to build our foundation based on that connection. We believe we are no longer alone; we are part of a tribe, surrounded by people just like us. This is an illusion and can actually inhibit our recovery. While it is beneficial to see and hear that we are not alone in our struggle, by submerging ourselves into a group where the requirement for membership and funding is addiction, we risk building our life around our symptoms. If we build our life around our symptoms, and the connections our symptoms have created, how will we let them go? If we let them go, we risk losing our connection, losing our foundation, losing our support system, and feeling alone and lost which, as I said before, is a trigger for self-medication.

Feeling lost and alone when facing the unknown is, I believe, the primary reason why so many of us have difficulty letting go of our addictions. Because of this we can get caught in a loop where we recover and relapse over and over again. This, in itself is a way of avoiding the cause of our symptoms. If we are always focused on our symptoms, and the chaos they create, then we do not have to focus on the cause, which ultimately creates our fear of the unknown. The loop can be relapsing, new relationships, changing jobs, changing living spaces, sex, anything that prevents us from moving forward. We know the loop, we are comfortable with it, so it becomes very difficult to break free from it when we are faced with the unknown. The reason we fear the unknown is probably the same reason we are using self-medication. Therefore to break the loop we must begin the

journey of learning what caused our fear. Here is an example of the loop when we use a relapse to avoid the unknown.



Now, I am not saying that rehabilitation theories like Alcoholics Anonymous are not beneficial, all I am saying is that, since the percentage for relapse is so incredibly high in organizations that require us to focus on our addiction, and since our addiction is only twenty percent of who we are, and is a symptom of a much deeper issue, then we should be careful not to use them as the foundation on which we build our life.

This leads me to my final thoughts on addiction. While people who are trying to overcome an addiction have difficulty moderating mood and mind altering substances, there are people who drink alcohol and ingest drugs sporadically throughout their lifetime without experiencing addiction. One may argue that there is no difference between the two groups, that drugs are unnatural and can harm or even kill us. Well, so can jumping out of an airplane, but that doesn't stop people from wanting to experience it. So, given that there have always been, and will always be, people who are curious about mind altering substances, perhaps we should approach the topic differently than using ignorance and propaganda.

It is so vividly obvious that the way we deal with drug use in this country is not working; in fact, it seems to be making it worse. So why do we continue to support it?

Why do we continue to allow our government to treat those who choose to use drugs as criminals? Why do we allow our government to fund programs that treat the symptom and not the cause? Why do we support programs with short-term treatment goals and high relapse rates? The more we question our government's fanatical determination to continue its failed war on drugs, the more we realize something has to be done to stop it.

People who become addicted to drugs are sick, not criminals. Yet, drug use has been defined by our judicial system as criminal behavior. In fact, our judicial system has spent a great deal of time, effort, and expense trying to condition us into believing that drugs are bad and those who do them should be punished. Personally I believe addiction is punishment enough. Addiction is a health issue, not a judicial issue, and should be treated as such. Alan Watts once said, "It's difficult to synthesize rehabilitation and punishment." This is because the two do not go together. There are thousands upon thousands of people in our prison systems who are getting worse, not better. A client of mine named Judy spent two years in prison for possession of crack. After she was released she had no home, no support system, no job, and no car. She also had the same chronic depression she entered prison with; except it was compounded with two years of being treated like a rapist and a murderer. The day she was released she started drinking and hasn't stopped. Since she is no longer using crack, our judicial system would see this as a victory.

Unfortunately, our current way of dealing with drug use is not going to change any time soon. But, I believe our first step would be to educate our society about drugs, drug use, and addiction in a way other than using generalizations and exaggerations. For example, not all mind altering drugs are the same. Some are worse for us than others.

But, because our government does not support any illicit drug use, they cannot say something like, “If you are going to try a mind altering drug, please stay away from crack, heroine, and the methamphetamines, as they are extremely harmful and addictive.” Instead they group all the drugs together, including their side effects, and use fear and punishment to protect us from our curiosity. Obviously this does not work. Our society needs to be educated. If someone tries pot, they may think drugs are not as bad as our government suggested. So, when approached with a methamphetamine, he or she may be less likely to refuse it. This is because their fear has been lessened by a drug that didn’t turn them into someone living in an alley and digging through trashcans for their next meal. If this person was educated about the differences between the drugs that are out on the street, then he or she may be more likely to avoid the ones that are considered to be extremely harmful and addictive. Simply by providing more education, we may eventually change our society’s perception of drug use and addiction, which may eventually change the way they are treated.

I’ve heard it said that our mind is our worst enemy. During times of war, victory is achieved by knowing ones enemy. Therefore, we must know our mind if we are to ever get out of it. I wish I could present some sort of ten-step guideline on how to achieve a peaceful mind. Doing so would make me a very rich man. Unfortunately, the path to creating a peaceful mind is different for everyone. For an addict, I believe the first step is understanding that the cause of addictive behavior is in our mind. This knowledge alone makes it is easier for us to see that our desire for self-medication is actually a desire to get out of our mind. Unfortunately we cannot escape our mind, and the relief we get from self-medication is an illusion, and a costly one. The second step is realizing that

since we cannot escape our mind, we must change it. From that step forward our journey is built on our desire for change.

I'm not saying it will be easy, but unless we have permanently damaged our minds, there is hope. We can change our perception of reality. By discovering the cause of our addiction, we can overcome it. By letting go of our old perceptions, our negative thoughts, and our distorted belief systems, we can create a mind that is a nice place in which to live. Over time we will finally be able look in the mirror and see someone who has recovered.

Steve Reedy 08/10/07

References

Berger, Kathleen (2005). *The developing person through the life span*. New York,

NY: Worth Publishers

Ruiz, D, M (1997). *The Four Agreements*. San Rafael, California: Amber-Allan

Publishing, Inc.