

Understanding Addiction

by Shriphani Palakodety

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A few theories on addiction suggest that the main reason we are addicted to something is because we feel an absence of something dear to us. Such as, a baby being left alone without the company of his mother for a decent period of time uses an addiction to divert his grief.

Well, the basic problem with this is that our world view seems to change from that point onwards and we don't seem to be able to recollect anything from that age. Indeed, if addiction was actually a by product of a mother leaving her child alone for a certain period of time, then pray how do you explain addiction to products like caffeine? Well, it is my belief that addiction stems from the tendency of our brain to undertake any action that gives us pleasure.

When I was a kid, I used to suck my thumb and indeed, I took this all the way to kindergarten (My mother's recollection not mine). One fine day, my mother told me to stop and that was it, I just quit sucking my thumb. Here is how I break down this event:

When a child is going through an age where bottle and mother's milk are the only sources of nutrition, sucking is the only way for it to enjoy pleasure. The child might not desire nutrition but it might certainly desire to suck on something (I saw this happening first hand when I saw my cousin growing up, the guy would suck on anything). The fact is that the kid is deriving pleasure through this act. I probably continued on the same path without learning that sucking was no longer going to give me pleasure. So when my mom told me to stop, I must have learned that this act wouldn't give me any pleasure.

Another addiction I "suffer" from is biting my nails. Few people understand how this act gives pleasure, well it does. I usually stick my nails in the gap between my canine (which is still a milk tooth by the way) and the gums and this unbelievably gives me pleasure. The point is that this pleasure is felt by at least two others with the same habit (I enquired about this from just two other people). Now, I can't obviously be taught that I can't derive any pleasure from this act because well, unconsciously, I keep doing this. My brain is causing me to undertake this action because it derives pleasure from it.

Wealth, respect in society, education and affluence are something every human aspires to achieve. The point here is that being well educated, rich and powerful and to be liked and admired by everyone might also be giving pleasure to the mind. One can draw lines between acts related to reproduction and the current scenario here. Mankind has not indulged in sex for reproduction always but for pleasure. Similarly, knowing that we have the resources to acquire whatever we want is also a pleasure inducing fact. Now, obtaining these resources is not an easy task and desperate situations might cause the need for these resources to be even severe. The result is obviously fooling the mind to

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believe that we are better off. Hence alcoholism. The mind is obviously feeling that we are in a much less scary / bad / tension-ridden state and is undoubtedly addicted to alcohol since we have managed to change our state (or pseudo-managed) without investing any time or effort in it. The brain loves this and the result is extreme addiction to alcohol.

Another example I want to quote is my addiction to caffeine. In my freshman year of college (and through most of high school), I loved studying and working in the night since the solitude it offered was really valuable to me. Evidently, my brain found pleasure in being productive in the night and I got addicted to caffeine since it was the only way to pull off such a stint.

Now, this begs the question, how do you cure addictions. Well, most of the techniques I have heard of involve intimidation. That is, we introduce a element of fear (usually by classical conditioning techniques) and our brain learns that if we try to indulge in the same activity that we know brings us pleasure, we might be greeted by something else (the thing we are afraid of). The problem here is that it is far too simple for the brain to learn that the fear has no chance of reappearing and might end up indulging the same habit all over again.

In the case of biting nails, I knew that people tape up their fingernails so they don't get to bite anything. Well, the problem is that the brain sees this as a worthless act and keeps waiting for a chance to indulge in the habit. A common problem seen with those who completely overhaul their omnivorous diets to move to fruitarianism, the brain craves for the better tasting food and begins craving for it and when there is a chance, it causes the individual to hog food from his/her previous diet.

The best possible technique in my opinion is to figure out how to teach the brain that there is no more pleasure to be had by indulging in that activity or substituting that pleasure with something else. For example, with alcoholics one might try modifying the surroundings a bit, treating the individual with respect and appreciating the better points of the individual's character. These might have positive effects and might lead the brain into thinking that the desired state has been achieved without alcohol. Also, the best way to prevent the habit would be to not allow alcohol to be used for pleasure. Coaxing the individual to take the harder route (hard work) might have a positive effect and the individual might not take to alcohol at all if he sees that things are working out.

To cure the problem of biting nails... well, get all teeth pulled out? LOL. We'll have to figure something out to ensure that the similar pleasure is felt but the technique employed does not involve biting fingernails. Possibly engineer edible fingernail like structures?