

ADDICTED TO PERFECTION

By Ginger E. Blume, Ph.D.

Addictions are complex. Traditionally, we think of addictions as involving an external substance (such as alcohol, a drug or food). Some types of addictions are tied to an external or tangible object such as money (i.e. compulsive saving or gambling). There are other types of addictions that are more related to certain “processes,” such as an internet addiction, workaholism, compulsive shopping, seeking sexual experiences, compulsive exercising, etc. Many of these latter addictive processes also result in an internal physiological change, such as producing endorphins that are themselves, internal, addictive chemicals or agents.

Four Common Characteristic of Addictions

Clearly, the topic of addictions is complex and varied. Yet, all forms of addictions seem to share some key elements in common. For instance, most addictions:

- 1) Result in destructive outcomes
- 2) Initially provide pleasurable or rewarding experiences
- 3) Progress over time into feelings of being out-of-control
- 4) Are probably tied to a neurobiological dysfunction(s)

This article explores how an obsessive and misguided belief system can also function like an addictive process. In treating individuals suffering with an Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD), I've noted that those who search for perfection, behave as if they were “addicted to perfection.”

Pleasure, then Pain

Intellectually, most OCD sufferers realize that perfection is unrealistic, yet they feel compelled to seek perfection to the detriment of the overall quality of their lives. Many sufferers say that “getting things perfect” gives them great pleasure, yet they cannot “not seek” perfection. This paradox is probably inherent in all addictive processes.

There is a complicated interplay between pleasure and pain in any addiction. The pleasure is typically momentary, while the pain becomes longstanding. For instance, the high of a drug quickly descends over time into a pit of emotional, financial, physical and relationship problems. AA literature clearly describes alcoholism as a progressive illness that becomes increasingly destructive overtime, destroying all aspects of an individual's life.

The high cost of an “addiction to perfection” is that one loses the ability to experience the true pleasures of life. Perfectionists are driven toward an unreachable goal, while being doomed to a sense of failure and inadequacy. Similar to other types of addictions, the compulsive need for perfection begins to interfere with the OCD sufferer's intimate relationships. Rather than have a mutually rewarding time together with a spouse sharing a dinner and a movie out, some perfectionist will feel a need to stay home and clean the house until it is perfectly clean and neat. Then, and only then, may they engage in enjoyment. Of course, the exhaustive nature of getting everything perfect, rarely leaves any energy for that delayed playtime.

AA Concepts helpful to the Perfection Addict

Why frame the compulsive need for perfection as an addictive process? How we think about problems can guide us to creative approaches to resolution or treatment. I'm suggesting that AA principles can be quite helpful in the Perfection Addict's (PA) recovery. For instance, most students who feel plagued by a need for perfection cannot imagine handing in a school essay that they feel is not perfect. Indeed, they might even receive a failing grade because they can't bring themselves to hand in a non-perfect paper! Using AA's "one day at a time," motto might help such an individual agree upon awakening each morning to seek mediocrity for just today. Like the alcoholic, the PA may be willing to tolerate this idea, if only for today.

Another key AA concept is the idea of bonding with others with a similar addiction and realizing that frequent human support is crucial to recovery. The shame and secretiveness associated with OCD is so similar to that of the drug/alcohol addict. This shame is best healed through being with others who are struggling with the same issues and seeing that they, not unlike you, are good and decent people. Historically, there have been too few venues for people with OCD to find group support.

When Perfection Addicts accept that they are powerless over their need for perfection, they may enlist of help of others and/or a higher power to resist the urge for perfection. The concept of powerlessness is quite helpful to any addict who has previously approached recovery through an act of sheer will.

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