

shalem Digest

Spring 2017

TOPICS OF INTEREST TO FRIENDS OF SHALEM MENTAL HEALTH NETWORK

Loving Someone with an Addiction

BY SUSAN WINTER FLEDDERUS

One of the hardest things to deal with in families and friendships is addiction. It seems such a bewilderingly powerful thing, and so destructive.

Family members wrestle over how to support their loved one, while at the same time dealing with their own anger about it, trying to protect themselves from the hurt and lies, and agonizing over the distress they know their loved one is in. And so often families struggle alone because of the desire to protect their loved one's reputation.

In addition, there are so many contradictory approaches and advice about how to deal with someone who is addicted. Families and friends are criticized for being "co-dependent" or "enabling" and encouraged to take a "tough love" approach and not tolerate wrongdoing or sin.

And we are living out these relationship dilemmas in the context of a society that has declared a war on drugs. Dealing with a loved one who is addicted has additional layers of complexity when we are worried they might be arrested, get a criminal record and ruin their future job prospects, or when we fear they might be in harm's way as they try to finance their illegal habit.

And even legal addictions—to gambling, pornography and alcohol—have potentially relationship-destroying effects that erode trust and closeness.

For years, treatments for addictions have been based on the understanding that the addictive substances themselves are what hook the addict. We think to ourselves that if they had never taken that first toke or seen that first image, they wouldn't be hooked. We want them to use more self-control or make better choices, and we feel frustrated when they go back to their addiction after a period of sobriety. We want to stop them from getting their hands on the crack or porn, and we wish it wasn't so easy for them to find.

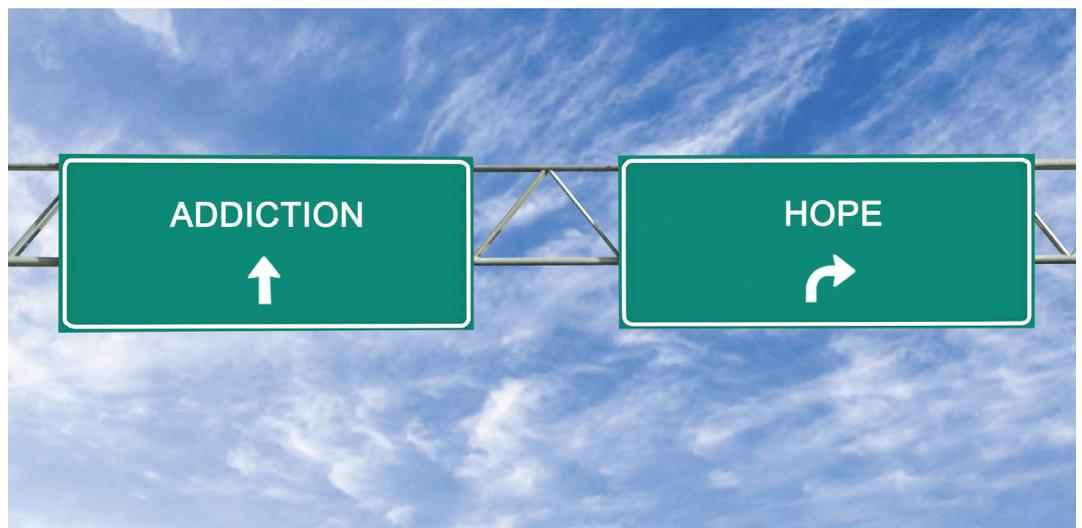
Sometimes we think that if they'd just try harder, pray more, or have more faith, they'd be able to overcome temptation and power of the addiction.

ADDICTION AS BONDS

New information about the nature of addiction is changing how we understand and treat it. There is recognition that many people are exposed to the same substances, but only a small portion of them become chemically addicted or physically dependent. Obviously, it can't simply be the drug itself that leads to addiction. This understanding has led researchers to look further into the causes of addiction.

Some doctors and scientists have come to recognize that for many, the key forces behind addiction are pain and disconnection.

Emotional pain is processed in the same parts of our brain as physical pain, according to research cited by Dr. Sue Johnson, founder of Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy. It isn't surprising, then, that people seek out opioids and other pain-killers to deal with the pain of ▶



▶ trauma, loss and loneliness.

Other addictions such as gambling or compulsive eating or pornography also seem to have their roots in social disconnection and emotional distress. People seek to self-soothe through substances or activities that numb the pain or provide some form of pleasure by activating our brains' endorphins—the naturally occurring opiates in our brains.

This recognition that the issues behind an addiction often have to do with pain and disconnection, rather than with the substance itself, is a paradigm shift that invites us to see addiction and addicts differently, and to find new treatment approaches.

Dr. Gabor Maté has written powerfully about his experience in treating patients with addictions, as well as his own struggle with addiction, in his book *In the*

Realm of Hungry Ghosts. He comes to the conclusion that addiction has a lot to do with coping with pain and trauma, particularly attachment trauma, in which the pain of broken relationship bonds or past abuse drive people to bond with substances rather than other people.

Johann Hari, a journalist and author who researched and wrote extensively on the history of the war on drugs in his book *Chasing the Scream*, also examines the research about the causes of addiction. He reports that while there are chemical hooks in addictive substances from nicotine to crack, research suggests that only a small portion—under 20%—of the addiction, craving, or compulsion to use can be attributed to physical or chemical dependence. He suggests that the rest is due to the social factors Maté and others identify.

Hari points out that healthy, happy people

bond with the people around them, but those who are traumatized, isolated or beaten down by life will instead bond with something that gives a sense of relief. He concludes “the opposite of addiction . . . is human connection.”

Hari's conclusions match what so many members of Alcoholics Anonymous have experienced first-hand—the vital importance of connection and community in overcoming addiction.

Both Hari and Maté point to connection as the antidote of addiction, and suggest that the path out of these unhealthy bonds is to form healthy human bonds.

People of faith recognize that in addition to human relationships, people are also designed for a relationship with their Creator. Such a relationship becomes a source of deep acceptance and healing encounters with a loving God. Programs such as Freedom Sessions and Celebrate Recovery provide those dealing with addictions a safe place to build these healing connections—healthy human bonds and spiritual ones.

PEACE NOT WAR

Both Maté and Hari point out that the Western world's current practices of arresting and isolating those with addictions, and disconnecting them from jobs and social resources due to the resulting criminal records, recreate the same conditions that led to the addiction in the first place and make it significantly more likely that they will continue or return to using. They advocate for an end to the war on drugs and changes in social policy which have shown to be more effective ways of responding to addictions.

Several countries, including Portugal, have decriminalized drugs and reallocated their financial resources previously used to prosecute and incarcerate addicts into funding treatment and social supports. Developing a comprehensive health response has been proven to be a much more effective way of treating addictions.

A recent CBC news article describes the benefits of Portugal's decriminalization of

drugs. In it, recovering heroin addicts share how being accepted, treated and given job training—rather than being jailed—has helped them get clean. In 1999, approximately 1% of the population—100,000 people—reported an addiction to hard drugs, and hundreds died every year. Ten years later, the number of addicts was cut in half and there were only 30 overdose deaths. And, decriminalization of drug use has led to changes in public attitudes about drug use and users.

THE POWER OF CONNECTION

Could this change in paradigm help families respond differently to their loved ones too? What if, instead of pushing for sobriety as a condition of closeness, we reached for connection first? What if we understood that for most people dealing with addiction, connection is a key component of achieving sobriety, regardless of the addictive substance?

What if we really got it that the best way to help someone with an addiction is to surround them with loving, unconditional supports and the social resources they need to feel connected, to have a sense of place and purpose, and to heal from their pain and trauma?

This would not involve letting someone with an addiction take advantage of the relationship by borrowing money to finance their habit or turning a blind eye to the damage done while under the influence. Nor does this mean ignoring the relationship-eroding effects of the secrecy and avoidance that accompanies addictions. Healthy boundaries and honesty about the impact of the substance use are essential in order to rebuild closeness in relationships.

Turning toward someone with an addiction and remaining open to an authentic connection can be excruciatingly difficult when there is a painful history of betrayals, broken promises or disconnection in the relationship. Perhaps the only way this could be possible would be to find a way to become curious and compassionate about the possibility of a painful past or

current struggle or ongoing sense of social disconnection.

When we begin to recognize the addiction as a symptom of someone struggling to cope with their painful past or overwhelming present while lacking the personal, social, spiritual or relational resources to do so in more healthy and effective ways, we can respond with compassion rather than judgment. In doing so, we create a safe emotional space, a relationship context in which healthy connections can develop and through which past hurts and attachment injuries—the pain of broken relationship bonds—can be healed.

It can be very difficult for families and friends to create such healthy connections and maintain them in the face of addiction. Couple or family therapy can be a valuable support. Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy (EFT) is especially effective in helping people understand the negative interaction patterns that develop in their relationship, how addiction plays into these patterns, and how to develop safe emotional connections in which individuals become healthier, addictions are overcome, and relationships are repaired.

Perhaps not everyone with an addiction would respond immediately—such healing is a delicate relationship process and doesn't happen instantly. But the success rate of this approach seems far higher than the more punitive approaches.

It isn't easy—we still don't have all the answers, but we do understand that providing connection, not rejection, will likely be most effective in inviting our loved ones out of addiction and back into close, healthy relationships. ◀

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LGBTQ+,
Mental Health
and FAITH

Join with GENEROUS SPACE MINISTRIES
and SHALEM MENTAL HEALTH NETWORK
for this joint conference.

FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 29, 2017

Mississauga, ON 9 am - 4 pm

WHAT TO EXPECT:

- a day of dialogue and co-learning with LGBTQ+ individuals and practitioners
- a better understanding of the complexity of mental health challenges for LGBTQ+ individuals
- a sharing of the unique challenges and opportunities for building support systems
- an exploration of the distinctions between mental illness and orientation/gender realities

Contact our office for more information and to register!

Shalem is committed to best practices in mental health and is a member of Family Service Ontario. All services are offered in strictest confidence.

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Resources for those dealing with addictions, and for their loved ones:

On its website, *Freedom Session* describes itself as follows: “a healing-discipleship journey that uncovers the roots of pain in our lives and invites Jesus Christ to heal those areas of our hearts. Freedom Session deals with issues—like pornography, broken marriages, sexual woundedness and abuse, addiction—by freeing us from our “drugs of choice”—the things we use to attempt to escape the pain in our lives.” 1.604.250.6095 freedomsession.com

Celebrate Recovery describes itself as a Christ-centered 12 step program for those who are ready to embark on a journey of real and lasting change. www.celebraterecovery.ca

Family Outreach Ontario Christian Addiction Support Services is a faith-based inter-denominational charitable organization. Their mission is to support those dealing with and affected by substance abuse and to provide referrals to professional help and counselling. 1.888.809.0464 www.familyoutreachontario.com

Teen Challenge is a residential alcohol and drug addiction faith-based program with centres located in Alberta, Atlantic Canada, Saskatchewan and Ontario. They offer help and hope to those struggling with alcoholism and/or addiction to other drugs, as well as to their families and friends. 1.877.343.1022 www.teenchallenge.ca

The Drug and Alcohol Helpline provides free health services information. 1.800.565.8603 www.drugandalcoholhelpline.ca

For information and a description of a number of addiction treatment centres in Ontario, visit: www.treatment-centers.ca/ontario

Shalem Mental Health Network provides individual, couple and family therapy in its Hamilton Office and access to such therapy across much of Ontario through its Congregational Assistance Program. 1.866.347.0041 www.shalemnetwork.org

