

IS OUR SOCIETY AN ADDICT?

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Ann Wilson Schaefer has written extensively about addictions and codependency, and her book When Society Becomes an Addict encapsulates systematic societal and cultural structures that support addictions and addictive behaviors, which we often don't like to look at. A major part of our health problems can be linked to addictions in one form or another. Thus it is vital to address such a widespread problem to improve our general health, individually and collectively. Her book goes into specific details about structures in our society promoting addiction, more than I have space in this article to cover, and it is recommended reading. I have extrapolated from her ideas with my own observations and have gathered thoughts from a variety of other sources regarding mass addiction in our culture.

I would define addiction as a behavior that seeks immediate gratification of a desire without regard for long-term consequences and that results in progressively less satisfaction. This requires more of the behavior than previously in order to obtain the same level of satisfaction, and then even more of the action is needed just in order not to feel worse than baseline, before it was ever started. Over time this becomes more and more destructive to the person and to others around him or her.

For example, with alcoholism, drinking gives a "high" or an intoxication, which is pleasurable, or temporarily kills emotional or physical pain. Then after the alcohol wears off, the good feeling not only disappears but also is followed by a rebound of ill feeling that is the opposite of the pleasurable one (the withdrawal phase). The person has to drink again if he or she wants to have that good feeling again. To avoid the withdrawal effect, the alcohol has to be ingested constantly, building up a "debt" of withdrawal that gets larger with time, and more and more needs to be drunk just to feel "normal," not even "high," which would require even more alcohol.

This exemplifies what happens to a greater or lesser degree with all addictions, including addictions to heroin, prescription pain killers, nicotine, tranquilizers, sedatives, stimulants, sugar and starch, work, sex, obsessive-compulsive behaviors, perfectionism, worry, guilt, gambling, violence, shopping, earning money and wealth, codependent relationships, security-seeking, movies, video games, television, pornography, texting, talking, social events, spectator events, and any pleasure-seeking or comfort-seeking behavior. None of these by themselves need to be addicting, but every one can be used to create an addiction.

In the larger social and national arena, we can see mass addictions to materialism, classism, racism, genderism, nationalism, militarism, war, revenge killings, and genocide. These can all become institutionalized structures and policies by mass consensus. These become addictions because they provide some temporary mass satisfaction that is not sustainable because they have withdrawal or backlash, which results in more intense and sometimes angry pursuit of the attempts to pursue those goals. The addiction process is

not the sole cause of these problems, but it plays a large role and needs to be considered in confronting these problems that plague our world.

A large part of chronic illness' burden on society, as well as the problems mentioned above, are related to lifestyle and individual and collective behaviors, and so understanding the addictive nature of our behaviors may be vital to changing them.

The attitudes that set the stage for addictive behavior are: expecting or desiring complete satisfaction, expecting perfection in an imperfect world, seeing things as rigidly one way or the other, black or white, right or wrong, losing a sense of humor, seeking pleasure without pain, overlooking the principle that everything comes at a cost, turning wants into needs, expecting a spouse or lover to fill all emotional needs, trying to avoid uncomfortable feelings, seeking short term comfort above all else, and seeking "happiness" from an external source rather than from an inner resource, like "going to the hardware store for milk."

We could encapsulate this idea that "There is no free lunch," in the concept that nature seeks a balance: What goes up must come down, effort and rest must be balanced, etc. Hot/cold, wet/dry, light/dark, soft/hard, fast/slow, and inside/outside, etc. are concepts in Traditional Chinese Medicine. Illness comes from our interfering with that balance. The balance will come eventually in ways we may not prefer or intend. In the words of Pope Francis, "God forgives always, humans sometimes, and nature, never." Someone eventually pays the price, sometimes others more than us. For example, addiction to excess use of energy can force future generations 80,000 years from now to suffer the burden of our nuclear waste, and we may feel guilty and lose self-esteem when we separate "us" from "them."

From the Judeo Christian tradition, the book of Ecclesiastes, chapter 3, "For everything there is a season, and a time for everything under heaven, ...a time to be born, and a time to die...a time to break down, and a time to build up...a time to weep, and a time to laugh...a time to mourn, and time to dance...a time to seek, and time to lose...a time to keep, and time to cast away...a time to rend, and a time to sew...a time to keep silence, and a time to speak..."

From the ancient Greek philosopher Pythagoras, "For the greedy, life is like a funeral banquet. They're surrounded by delicious food, but even so they're not happy." The Greek philosopher Heraclitus: "It is not good for people to get everything they want." Swami Vivekananda from India: "Desire is never satisfied by the enjoyment of desires; it only increase more, like fire when butter is poured up on it."

Regarding pain, our bodies produce endorphins, natural opioid substances that diminish the experience of pain and give a feeling of well-being. If we never felt pain, no endorphins would be produced. If we experience many minor pains, endorphins are produced to help cope with not only that pain, but with other pains that may come along, (nature seeking a balance). So if we endure minor pains, we are better prepared for bigger pains, if and when they occur. On the other hand, if we pop an acetaminophen or

an ibuprofen every time we get a strain, scrape, bruise, cramp, spasm, insect sting, etc., the brain says, “no problem, no extra endorphins needed here.” Then because we lack the endorphins, we also miss out on the other many benefits endorphins give, such as balancing and toning the immune system.

If we experience grief, loss, and sadness, a good cry (especially with support from a friend) can bring great benefit, and some relief. If we take a tranquilizer to avoid feeling the depths of our grief and cry less, the unexpressed grief may turn to depression later on, and we experience more suffering than if we had let the feelings out in the first place. If we accept the inevitable pains that life gives from time to time, we suffer less. The Sun, in a recent interview with Francis Weller, “The Geography of Sorrow,” he says, “We live in a ‘flat-line culture,’” and “We experience little joy because we avoid the depths.” He quotes Kahlil Gibran, “The deeper that sorrow carves into your being, the more joy you can contain.”

Anthropology shows us that growth occurs in response to stress. If a muscle is stressed by exercise, then nature, seeking a balance, senses weakness in the face of the challenge and strengthens the muscle in response. Societies where the food is tough and chewy grow stronger jaws and well-shaped palates, gums, and teeth, as well as highly resonant singing voices. In our culture where the food is soft, the results are crooked, cramped teeth in small arches, poor tongue function, sleep apnea, poor vocal resonance, and a host of autonomic nervous system disorders. See my article on “Oral System Biology.”

If we avoid exercise because it is uncomfortable, we will likely experience more discomfort later in the form of chronic illness. So “use it or lose it” applies in the effort required to maintain good health. Using our contentment “muscle” or our happiness “muscle” makes it stronger. Likewise using our worry or whining “muscle” makes it stronger. If we look for things to worry and complain about, life will provide more of those things to fill a vacuum because we are feeling a need to worry. When we take our focus off our inner resources for strength, serenity, etc., to focus on negativity, we are laid vulnerable to addictions then, looking for external sources to “make us happy,” (which they cannot do). Addictions can lead to low self-esteem, which in turn, promotes addictions, a vicious cycle.

Some of us may not shoot heroin or get drunk or smoke, but we may have addiction to relationships. Space does not allow for a complete discussion of the complexities of dysfunctional and co-dependent relationships in this article, but here are some of the basic dynamics: Some of us may have grown up in dysfunctional families that do not help the development of positive self-esteem in a child. This often is a result of alcohol or other drug abuse in the family. If, for whatever reason, we feel inadequate in ourselves, we look for validation of ourselves in a relationship with another person, seeking approval from that person, seeking to rescue, control, or manipulate him or her, (thinking, “It’s easier to fix another person than to fix myself.”).

This may start with “falling in love,” each person supposedly fulfilling what’s missing in the other person, but usually with time, step by step, each person gets angrier and angrier that the other person is not filling one’s own emotional needs, and it becomes obvious, that it was not “love” that was the driving force that sparked the beginning of the relationship, but rather “need,” a hope that “someone is going to save me” from unhappiness, emptiness, loneliness, etc., “going to the hardware store for milk” again. So staying in that mode of the relationship brings self-esteem even lower, and loads on more guilt. Often that style of relating continues because, like any addiction, it promises more than it delivers, and the hope stays alive that if you keep doing more of the same, things will get better.

A person may leave that relationship and start up another addictive relationship, acting out the same patterns, and in the beginning it seems like a new beginning with a new person, just as an alcoholic may quit whisky and switch to beer, hoping for better control of the drinking, but the same quagmire eventually occurs with the new person. This is the famous, “doing the same thing over and over, expecting different results.”

When self-esteem suffers as a result of this dysfunctional relationship, personal, emotional, and spiritual growth is stifled. All addictions put growth on hold. Personal development, unfolding of one’s full potential, completing the stages of life’s tasks, fulfilling one’s purpose, are all put on hold or severely slowed. When we depend on another person for our own sense of validity, acceptance, etc., then (nature seeking a balance, says, “It’s all taken care of from that other person, no need to work on developing inner personal resources for accessing inner happiness”), and self-esteem gets weaker, even if the relationship is not in major conflict or about to fall apart. If the relationship ends abruptly, suicide and/or murder sometimes occurs, just as a heroin addict or a coke addict, when running out of stuff, does unthinkable criminal things because of horrible feelings of withdrawal.

Our addictive culture does us no favor by romanticizing relationships with movies, songs, poetry, etc.

The most successful, functional relationship is established when each person supports the other person in a common purpose that transcends the relationship. As two wings don’t make a bird, the wings each support the body of the bird. Joy, love, and fulfillment in the relationship come from the common commitment to a higher purpose. That is true interdependence in contrast to independence or codependence.

Support groups such as Codependents Anonymous help people successfully change the dysfunctional patterns and establish new, healthy, non-addictive patterns within the same relationship or with a new person, or to experience being a whole person without a need for an intimate relationship. Sometimes individual counseling is also necessary to support people going through these changes.

Building self-esteem and changing codependent patterns means changing behavior, not only toward an intimate partner, but also with acquaintances, and with all of society.

Some of these may include being more authentic, pleasing people less, learning to say “no” clearly, gently, and respectfully, affirming our right to make choices, to make mistakes, to change our minds, and to not look perfect. When we say “no” when appropriate, our “yes” will be more authentic. When we no longer seek to control or manipulate people (as the politicians mostly do), people will trust us. The 12-step groups such as Codependents Anonymous can help us in making these growth steps, even if we are not in an intimate relationship with a specific person.

Medical care is another area of our society where addiction is common, not only in the excessive prescribing of pain medications, but in the general dependence on the pill as a quick fix, regardless of whether it is a diabetes pill, a blood pressure pill, an antidepressant, or an anti-anxiety pill. This is the search for an easy short cut without doing the work of changing lifestyle, exercise, nutrition, etc. and avoiding doing the personal work, counseling and emotional work to remove unhealthful behavior and thinking patterns that contribute to illness, be it physical or psychiatric. The addictive society promotes this drug dependency by supporting the lucrative pharmaceutical industry and condoning its criminal behaviors. Refer to my articles on “A New Paradigm in Mental Health”, and about “Deadly Medicine and Organized Crime, How the Pharmaceutical Industry Has Corrupted Medicine.”

The structure of our economic system encourages addictions with the lure of the marketplace to buy more stuff. It rewards workaholic behavior, as people feel driven to acquire more and more monetary wealth at the expense of health and family. Acquiring something new gives a temporary “high” as a drug may do, but the satisfaction wears off, as the thing did not fill that inner angst, lack of happiness, and ever more and more is needed to try to fill a bottomless pit. This occurs when the wealthy are not content with the wealth but need to acquire more and more, no matter if this ceaseless craving violates moral, ethical, and legal principles, corrupts politics, and cheats the less wealthy and the poor, all in a drive to increase the quarterly reports and shareholder value, worshipping at the altar of money and the so-called “free market.” If we try to get happiness with material things, our inner happiness fades, since we don’t exercise it.

Now, my discussion of materialism and worship of money may ring hollow to the working poor, who work at 2 jobs for minimum wage and either are homeless or one step from that. They need to earn more money, and rightly so, but the problem is not for lack of effort. The system that cheats them needs to change to give them a fairer playing field. Yet some low-income people vote against their own self-interest by favoring the measures that give the wealthy more opportunities, hoping that they too will “strike it rich” some day. This can be akin to addiction to gambling at a casino, hoping unrealistically for that lucky break which most people don’t get. The casino wins in the end. Without restructuring the current economic system, the working poor are not likely to gain ground. Collective action to create better opportunities for the poor cannot happen if people are stuck in denial of the problem and don’t recognize the need for different actions than what have been taken so far, “doing the same thing expecting different results.”

What happens when we as a nation, driven with an insatiable appetite for cheap material goods from all over the world, have to defend not just our shores from invasion, but also our “interests?” Those “interests” require over 100 military bases in over 100 countries, supporting the overthrow of democratically elected governments, establishing global trade agreements to install international financial control by corporate oligarchies, squeezing out influence by the less wealthy, throwing farmers off their land, creating food insecurity, famine, starvation, and destruction of the planet’s ecosystems, usually affecting the poor the most. This results in hatred against our country and fuels support for terrorists, and then we are back again to defending our shores and installing security measures that violate our civil liberties, and now we are addicted to our military more than ever. The more we use it, the more we need to use it, “doing the same thing over and over, expecting different results.” Then, as with many other addictions, this leads to fear, paranoia, guilt, anger, and more violence.

Another societal addiction is the “isms.” When we feel inadequate in ourselves or fearful or worried, we succumb to nationalism, racism, genderism, militarism, and sectarian religious structures to give us a feeling of support our security, making those things our higher power instead of God. We give our loyalty or allegiance over to our country or our religion. This then leads to genocide, war, rape, murder, etc., since we feel justified, now that we have dehumanized those people of another religion or country as “them,” as separate from “us.” We use “gooks,” “infidels,” and other diminutive terms to describe them.

Just as in personal addictions, our societal addictions are defended by denial. If we do not see that we have a problem, we will continue to “do the same thing over and over, trying to get different results.” As Albert Einstein once said, “A problem cannot be solved at the same level of thinking that created the problem in the first place.” If we do not face the kind of thinking that created this addiction, we will not be able to “think outside the box,” to go one step higher in level of thinking to solve the problem.

So, collectively and individually, we must break the denial of the consequences that our addictions are bringing on us, or we will continue to increase our suffering, the suffering of generations to come, and of our planet. The first step is to recognize that we are controlled by the addiction. That is the basic starting off point for all of the 12-step programs, to recognize that we are powerless over the addiction, and that by turning our lives over to a Higher Power, we can recover. This does not mean belonging to a specific religion or worshipping a specific God. The 12-step programs have a generic concept for this that allows even atheists to participate.

The 12-step groups have been a powerful force transforming lives of people all over the world, and yet their full potential is mainly yet untapped. Besides AA, Al-Anon, and Codependents Anonymous, there are Narcotics Anonymous, Overeaters Anonymous, Debtors Anonymous, Workaholics Anonymous, and many more. If we don’t join a specific 12-step group, if we follow the steps and make use of counseling and other support groups, we can work on these problems. The core issue is recognizing the need to turn to a Higher Power and to maintain a connection with the Higher Power with

prayer and meditation. Through that we realize that the happiness we were seeking through addictions can be found within the communion with that Source, and in letting go of our ego selves that want to control everything. We can discover serenity, contentment, peace, self-acceptance, and acceptance of others. We can enjoy the simple pleasures of life that do not cost anything. We can then discover our purpose that serves our community and our world. We can individually and collectively influence our culture and lead it to recovery. When we take responsibility for our actions, we regain self-esteem and access to our inner peace, and we lighten up and reclaim our sense of humor.

So international efforts to prevent or stop war, genocide, environmental devastation, etc. by diplomacy, coalitions of peace keepers, international law, humanitarian aid, humane and ecological economic development, democracy, education, etc. must also be accompanied by an international effort to include education about addiction, and support systems for recovery. Nations and religious organizations need to self-examine regarding how racism, militarism, etc. are fed by addictions and poverty, and how these “isms” feed addictions. This is a fundamental human problem that no one seems to be addressing on an international scale. Let us look at it now so we don’t have to “hit bottom” as some addicted people end up doing before breaking their denial to go into recovery.

We are all involved in addictions in one way or another. We need not point our fingers at “dope addicts,” “crack heads,” “drunks,” etc. These are disrespectful terms that by projection distract us from our own addictions. The “war on drugs” turns out to be a “war on black people.” We need to provide treatment programs instead of prisons (except for violent offenders). If we recognize where our own addictions are, we will have compassion for ourselves and for others.

A signatory feature of the 12-step programs is the “Serenity Prayer.” “God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.” When we are caught in addictions, we are afraid to exercise our power to change things that we can, and we worry and get angry about things we have no control over, and we get confused about which is which. This prayer encapsulates a huge part of all of our lives. If we have that serenity, courage, and wisdom, our individual and collective lives will change dramatically (for the better).