

Addiction: A Disease of the Mind, Body and Spirit

By Jim Rachels



Addiction is a terrible thing that affects someone on many levels. It tears apart lives. It doesn't just attack one thing or the other when it comes to its effects, it attacks everything in your life. It affects your body, mind and spirit.

Let's start with the mind. The mind is highly affected by substance abuse. Let's use alcohol as an example. It is actually possible to actually drink so much that your brain actually shrinks a little bit. This in turn can then cause something that is sometimes called a "wet brain". Addiction manifests itself by hijacking the brain, more specifically the reward system.

One thing that affects the reward system is the habits we form. Some of the habits that you learn throughout the years are not easy to change. Your body will want to resist this. And this is done on purpose. Your body wants to hold onto some things so it doesn't have to relearn those things every day. A good example is you wouldn't want to have to relearn to walk every day or put your clothes on. So your subconscious learns and holds onto those things. The more something is done the more it will become a habit that is difficult to break.

So how are habits formed? First, your brain must learn which activities to learn so they can turn them into a habit. It also teaches them what not to learn and turns it into a habit. The habit is formed based on the reward it will get after performing whatever task has become a habit. This is called "reward-based learning." In this, there is a trigger, behavior and then a reward. An example I heard was discussing someone tying their shoes. Seeing the shoelace untied is the trigger, and the behavior is then tying your shoe and the reward is not tripping when you walk. And the more rewarding the behavior is the more engrained the habit becomes. Our brain actually sets up a system that tracks the behavior that is most rewarding down to the least rewarding behaviors. So when given the choice between something such as candy or vegetables the brain remembers all the sugar and everything that made us feel good about the candy then considers this more rewarding and then prefers eating the candy over the vegetables. This is the reason that if you try to quit something sometimes it can be incredibly hard to break that habit as your brain is now wired that way. The way to change this is to up the reward value of certain traits that you would like to change for the better.

Eating is a huge part of our lives and a huge part of many people's addictions. Many people upon leaving rehab gain a bunch of weight for two reasons. First, there is a large probability that many of these addicts were malnourished. The other reason is they are still fighting their addiction issues and many have switched from their drug of choice to food. This is something that is quite common among addicts in recovery.

Another thing that has to do with your mind is your subconscious. Many people never analyze what's truly going on in their minds. This is when you are thinking of something but are not fully aware of it. We do things that we may not even notice we are doing. It just comes naturally. Many of the things that become routine to us happen in the subconscious mind. Our substance use can become part of our unconscious mind. It just becomes something that we're used to doing. Our subconscious mind is formed in part because of our daily activities and habits. If we do the same thing over and over eventually that becomes something that can be done subconsciously.

Our subconscious can also be seen as a type of autopilot. You are doing many things that are done subconsciously and don't even realize it. A great example I heard was that of someone having a conversation with someone while driving. At that point, the autopilot comes and takes over your driving the car as you speak with your friend and focus on how to interact in that conversation. Some people sometimes drive all the way home and then realize that they don't remember most of the ride home, they were on autopilot. This is how our subconscious works. Sometimes it kicks in when it needs to and does what it needs to do.

This can be seen as a type of programming for someone. Children learn all their habits from their parents and the people around them. So this programming starts off very young. Eventually, after certain things are repeated, this will become part of that person's subconscious mind.

The good thing about this is the fact that you can help yourself by working at changing the type of programming that was instilled in you with something better. The behaviors that were ingrained in you are not permanent. With enough hard work and discipline, this is something that can be changed.

This also has to do with neuroplasticity in the brain. The definition of this is "the ability of the brain to form and reorganize synaptic connections, especially in response to learning or experience or following injury." As you can see it says the ability to form and reorganize the brain. That is where you can make some real changes with enough effort. Eventually, your old habit will disappear and you will learn new habits. You will have taught yourself new patterns in your life to follow. Habituation is extremely important in this process. The more and more you do something the quicker this will become a pattern and a habit.

One of the biggest things you can do to help change for the better is to become more aware. More aware of the way you think and more aware of what you are feeling. Things can change dramatically when you slow down and become more aware of the things you are doing. One example from a lecture I

heard was about someone who smoked cigarettes. When they actually became completely aware of what they were doing they realized they didn't even like smoking and thought it smelled awful. This same exact situation happened to me. One day while standing in my kitchen it just hit me that I didn't even truly enjoy smoking cigarettes but I was smoking them anyway. Once you develop awareness this lowers the amount of reward your brain recognizes in response to a cigarette. This in turn helps you to stop smoking because it now has less of a reward attached to it.

So what are some things we can do to help the mind in its battle against addiction? I think the first thing that should be done is to start trying to unlearn the bad habits that you have become so used to that you don't even think about it while you're doing it in some cases. We need to fight the urges that we get because of our addiction. They have become second nature and we need to change that.

Now let's talk about what drug and alcohol abuse do to the body. Substance abuse wreaks havoc on our bodies. It affects multiple organs in the body and does great harm. Alcohol for example does significant damage to the liver, stomach, kidneys, brain and intestines. This is just to name a few, alcohol and drug abuse affect other parts of the body as well. And repeated drug and alcohol use can cause changes to the way your brain functions and operates.

One of the first things that happen from continued abuse is getting a fatty liver. This builds up over time based on someone's drug and alcohol use. Continued abuse can lead to cirrhosis which is irreversible scarring on the liver.

Alcohol travels throughout the entire body affecting all of our organs. It also contributes to all types of cancer such as breast cancer, throat cancer and stomach cancer.

Something else that dramatically affects the body is when someone is going through withdrawals. People will feel terrible. The severity of the withdrawals will depend on which substance you are detoxing yourself from. It will also depend on how much of a tolerance you built up throughout your continued use.

The most dangerous things to detox from are alcohol and benzodiazepines. Without the proper support, these are two things where the withdrawal can actually cause death. Other drugs such as opiates are rarely fatal and you will feel like you are dying but you won't actually die. Nonetheless, withdrawal is something that you should try to always reach out and seek assistance with. And this in almost all cases affects the body in one way or another.

Sometimes the body goes through such terrible withdrawal symptoms that people need medical assistance in order to safely go through the withdrawal process. I know for me I felt terrible and my hands were shaking so for the first few days and they were giving me something to help deal with my symptoms. I don't know what I would've done without that assistance since I was a heavy drinker and it wasn't a smart idea to try to face the withdrawals on my own.

So what does addiction do to the spirit?

I think one the first things I can say about this is it dramatically reduces the amount of spirituality one has in their life. It might even take all the spirituality out of someone's life.

Some people might have been quite spiritual in their lives before they started using and then it just went by the wayside as their addiction got worse. Some people would meditate and pray every day before their addiction really took hold. Then slowly but surely they reduced the amount of spiritual practice until they completely stopped altogether. Their drug of choice became the most important thing in their life and some nearly lose everything they have and some even lost everything to their addiction.

Something a lot of people start utilizing in their recovery is prayer. And this works for many people. Religion is certainly a spiritual experience for many around the world and addicts can tap into that and use it as a resource for their recovery. This can be any type of religion. There are many throughout the world to choose from.

I believe that it is very difficult to keep up with your spiritual practice while in active addiction. For some reason, it is just something people lose touch with why they are fighting addiction day in and day out.

Many people lose touch with their higher power, whatever that may be. I'm a believer that having a higher power is extremely helpful in anyone's recovery. I don't believe it to be a necessity but it is something that is extremely important to many people around the world in recovery. So if you have had some type of higher power in your life before I think this is something you should try to reconnect with.

Another thing that should be cleared up is you do not need to just pick one of the existing religions and then just try to follow it. Your higher power can be anything of your choosing. Some people misunderstand this and think they just have to be either a Christian, a Jew or a Muslim, etc. and then just blindly follow one of those faiths. This is not necessary in order to get yourself on the right path to sobriety. You just need to focus your efforts on whatever you think is going to help your sobriety and help your

spirituality grow. Spirituality comes in many forms and you get to choose the one that is best for you.

Once you grow spiritually the feeling of wanting to use will subside. A good spiritual practice can be a very important part of anyone's recovery. Believing in something bigger than yourself comes along with its many benefits. And again this higher power can be anything of your choosing, there are no rules. In the end, you will know what's best for you and will hopefully find that path for yourself.