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### **Addiction: A Nightmare for Modern Mankind**

By Kit S. Ng, PhD

There is no one issue which affects the daily survival and well-being of an individual and family in any developing world more than the issue of addiction.

Addiction of all types is a highly complex problem that affects the physical, emotional, behavioural, and mental health of individuals and also their families and social environment.

Addiction is America's number one public health crisis. The National Institute of Alcoholism and Alcohol Abuse estimates that one-in-four Americans is directly impacted by someone in need of help for an alcohol or drug problem. In Asia, addictions have affected millions of residents and destroyed untold amount of individuals and families. While many enjoy the economic booms in Asia, others witness individuals destroying themselves as a result of gambling problems.

Substance abuse alone costs the US about \$180 billion in crime, productivity loss, health care, incarceration, and drug enforcement. That is about \$600 for every woman, child and man in the US. When combined with alcohol and tobacco costs, they exceed \$500 billion. That is about \$1666 for every woman, child and man in the US according to The Lewin Group.

An individual may become physically and/or psychologically dependent on the following substances, behaviors or activities. Some of these avenues of addiction include:

- Alcohol
- Illegal/Legal Substance
- Shopping
- Exercise
- Overeating or undereating
- Work
- Sex
- Internet surfing
- Gambling

What factors contribute to such an enormous impact on our human kind? Experts have different opinions, but most agree on some core factors that contribute to addiction in general.

Environmental factor has been a stated cause in addiction. Children raised by addicted parents tend to view addiction-related behaviour as acceptable, making them more likely to engage in addiction themselves. Teens that mix with peers who use addictive substance indiscreetly, also tend to be influenced by those addictive behaviors. Studies also show that individuals who experienced sexual, psychological, emotional or physical abuse are more likely prone to use addictive means to cope. The addiction becomes a coping mechanism, helping the individuals deal with strong negative

emotions surrounding the abuse, such as feelings of severe low self-esteem, anxiety, depression, isolation, and possible flashbacks.

The issue of genetics as a contributing factor to addiction has been a divisive issue with experts in the field of addiction. Some believe, particularly alcoholism may be inherited. Others are not too excited about such causality.

Regardless of whether the addiction is inherited or not – all addictions have the same basic characteristics – obsession, compulsion, loss of control, and continued use in the face of negative consequences are all hallmarks of addiction. The main overriding symptom of an addiction is loss of control. An addict reaches a point at which they can no longer control how often or how much they will engage in the activity or use the substance.

In the past, addiction simply referred to physical and psychological dependence on an addictive substance such as alcohol or drugs. Further research has revealed that psychological dependence has much more to do with the equation than originally thought. The reason that behaviors and activities can also become addictive is that they may create chemical changes in the brain that will cause craving. When someone engages in an enjoyable activity, chemicals are released in the brain, which create a feeling of euphoria. The person may then chase that feeling of euphoria, continually and repeatedly engaging in the behaviour or activity searching for the high. Individuals often use certain behaviors as a way to cope with anxiety and depression as well and they may overuse those behaviors or activities as a way to keep anxiety or depression at bay.

Some of the deadly cycles of addiction include:

- Compulsive use of the substance or engagement in the activity stands in the way of meeting responsibilities at home or at work.
- Continuing use of the substance or behavior when it is dangerous or destructive.
- Increasing need for the substance or behavior
- Tolerance of the substance or behavior, meaning it takes more and more of the substance or behavior to produce the desired effects or feelings
- Attempts to stop using the substance or behavior without success
- Withdrawal symptoms such as depression occur when use of the substance or behavior ends.

Scientific researches since the mid-1970s show that treatment can help many people change destructive behaviors, avoid relapse, and successfully remove themselves from a life of addiction. Recovery from drug addiction is a long-term process and frequently requires multiple episodes of treatment. Based on this research some key principles have been identified that should form the basis of any effective treatment program:

- A multi-dimensional approach (Motivational interviewing, Cognitive-Behavioral, etc...) is very necessary. This would include individual, groups, family, psycho-education, aftercare and community support (such as 12-step groups)

- Treatment needs to be assessed often and modified to meet the person's changing needs
- Staying in treatment for an adequate period of time is critical for treatment effectiveness
- Counselling and other behavioural therapies are critical components of virtually all effective treatments for addiction
- Co-existing mental health disorders need to be addressed.
- The process of recovery from addiction can be a long-term process and typically requires multiple episodes of treatment, including "booster" sessions and other forms of continuing care.

The bad news is that addiction worsens over time. One will begin to see more patterns over the years. This is usually not something that happens quickly. And these patterns relate to what we'll call loss of control, where they start drinking at the wrong times, time when you would not expect.

In the next stage is when the addiction begins to take over the individual. It begins to affect them more and more socially, in their employment, and in their personal relationships. So they spend less and less time with their friends and more and more time taken over by their addiction. They spend less and less time having normal interaction with their family, and more and more time away with various excuses. And as the preoccupation increases, generally the denial and the pretending that it's not occurring increases at the same time. So as the addiction gets worse, they're often less likely to see it.

The final stage is usually best defined when the addiction is beginning to have physiological effects. One will experience the physical damage (in the case of alcohol, there will be problems with your liver, etc...). It's beginning to affect their entire life, at every single level, and often by then, the family has gone through this for so many years they do not have the emotional resources to see it through. That's often when the threat of divorce occurs – or do occur – or where the family just says, "I give up" or they start to seek out more extreme ways to try to intervene.

The good news is that there is hope even for the severely addicted individuals. I have witnessed untold number of lives, families, relationships and careers destroyed by different types of addictions during my twenty years of clinical experience as a practising therapist at two treatment centers in the United States. And I also saw lots of healing, recovery, and reunion.

Keep hope alive. You can do it. Seek help. Good luck in your recovery!

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