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Season 04. Episode 12

Podcast Title: Why is The Addict Doing This to Me?

I suppose the easy answer is that addicts do what they do because that's what addicts do. In other words, they don't need a reason, none of it makes sense, and it can be awfully mean-spirited at times.

Clearly that is not in any way an adequate answer.

We need a much deeper understanding of why addicts do what they do and why they think the way they think. If we are to lessen the confusion, bring a measure of peace into our existence and be in a better position to be of actual help to our addicted loved one, we need to bring some truths into the light.

The following is paraphrased from an excellent book on the topic called Addict in the House by Robin Barnett. I highly recommend it as a no-nonsense guide about addiction and recovery, should that be the challenge in your family.

Let's start with a truth that is very difficult for non-addicts to grasp. Non-addicts have a hard grasping how much power an addiction has over an addict. Most people would be shocked by the way an entire existence can be directed toward getting drunk or high.

To live as an addict, you may connive and cheat, lie and steal -whatever it takes - to feed your disease.

Imagine, if you will, going without food for a prolonged period. After a while, the lack of nourishment would begin to affect your actions and your mood. You might make mistakes or exercise poor judgment. Before too long, your hunger takes you over, and it's all you can think about.

We would all like to believe that we'd behave honourably in the face of hunger, but it's easy to believe that with a full stomach. If you had to manipulate someone or distort the truth or even steal in order to feed yourself, at some point, you probably would.

An addict's pursuit of alcohol or drugs works in a similar way. Like hunger, being addicted is not a deliberate state. It is biological in nature. An untreated addict has no more control of his actions than you might if you were starving. In the grip of an addiction, your loved one's previously held standards and principles no longer apply. Throw those cherished values out the window.

The irony here is that after an addict has had his episode - let's say he stole from his mom's purse to buy coke - he may feel guilty after all, but now he's faced with lying about what he did. Chances are that he will not own up to what he did even if he feels like he should not have done what he did.

The point is that until you understand an addict's behaviour and thinking, your attempts to help will have little effect, your peace of mind will be shot, and the misguided things you do may even help the addiction thrive.

The insidious part of addiction is not how the addict behaves when he's high - that is hard enough to watch - it's how it affects your loved one when he's *not* intoxicated. Even when he is not high or drunk, the addiction is working behind the scenes to ensure its survival. That means making sure that the addict can get more of the substance - by any means necessary - and shutting down any factor that could threaten his continuing use.

I might as well share my story that illustrates that very point. It amazes me still that I threw away a six-figure job due to the effects of my drinking and using - and this is in 1990 when six figures was real money, and still is. I should say that the disease stole my career and my sanity before I woke up and surrendered. So, when I say I threw my career away, it was an involuntary action driven by the compulsive nature of the disease.

Addicts act without thinking of the consequences that their behaviour has on themselves or on others, whether the consequences are immediate or way down the road.

A typical workday, before I was fired for total dereliction of duty, incompetence, dishonesty and whatever else I did or did not do, would look like this, let's say, starting at 5:00 PM.

I would wait until 5:00 for the day to officially end, and that was the cue for me to head for the bar across the street and order two vodka doubles, one at a time. Then, having settled myself down, I would walk across the street to the parking garage to get my truck to drive home about 20 minutes up the lake shore drive.

On the way home to my apartment, I would stop at the College Tavern and have two more vodka doubles, one at a time, but pretty quickly, then next door to the wine shop and pick up a bottle of some decent red and head home a few blocks away to start dinner.

Dinner gets started, I drink wine and by the time the evening is over the bottle is invariably finished. In the meantime, I would often (not always) smoke some dope and get high from that, along with some pulls off the vodka bottle in the freezer.

I am so high and drunk by 1:00 AM that I take two codeine pills to put me under so I can get something approaching sleep. I wake up at about 7:30 and drink massive amounts of coffee to get it going.

I did this over and over again and again for hundreds of workdays in a row. On the weekend, I did that kind of thing but mixed it in with wanton sex and burning cash on cocaine whores, even though I never did like cocaine myself.

Some women were purely innocent, and I cannot believe now, looking back, the lies I told them and how I hurt them when all they wanted was just a decent relationship with a decent man.

The one lady with whom I had a relationship that had some promise, whom I betrayed time and again, would ask me "Why are you doing this to me? Don't you understand what love is?"

Can you feel the stab in the heart?

All I really ever wanted at the time was to get and stay drunk and high, preferably both, and also look normal while doing that. I would feel deep shame for what I suspected I had become; I had lost my self-respect, but I did whatever I could to keep up the pretence of normalcy. Until I got fired.

Then the evidence that I was anything approaching normal vanished. I could no longer say, if you suggested that maybe I was drinking too much: "F... off, I'm making lots of money. Leave me alone".

The addict has no intention of hurting you personally, just as I had no intention of hurting my girlfriend with my betrayals, but it is hard not to take what he does personally.

So, what is behind an addict's irrational, self-destructive behaviour? The addicts I know (and I have come to know hundreds over the last 27 years) have often shared with me that being an active addict is like having two different people inside of them. Example:

"When the craving kicks in, there's nothing stopping me. One minute I'm OK, working or enjoying life and the next, I'm driving to the crack house and if anyone were to challenge me, I tell them to f... off, no matter who it is...unless I'm at work. I just hate that. But it happens all the time, and I do not know how to stop that on my own".

The weird thing is that addicts believe that they are supposed to suffer, as if they have a fatal moral defect that has them do what they do. Few accept the idea that they are in the grip of a potentially fatal disease that compels them to do things that, had they retained the power of choice, they would never in a million years even contemplate doing what they end up doing.

If you think of the addiction and the addict (the person who has the addiction) as two different things for a moment, it might help you understand what is going on, and perhaps you might have a bit more compassion for the person who's been driving you crazy.

Think of the addiction as an entity that has taken your loved one over. And because an addiction's *only purpose* is to feed itself, it uses a wide array of strategies, hijacking the addict's intelligence, skills, and relationships.

These include out and out denial, minimizing, justifying, blaming, lying, and evasion. None of them are designed to hurt you, but they hurt, nonetheless.

It is almost impossible to not take the things that the addict does personally, but when you see them as symptoms of the disease - the addiction - at work, as opposed to actions of evil intent on the part of your loved one, some of the burden is lifted.

With the emotional burden somewhat lightened, you can then turn to taking much better care of yourself, which is what you have deserved all along.

What we've learned today is that:

1. Non-addicts have a hard time grasping how much power an addiction has over an addict. Most people would be shocked by the way an entire existence can be directed toward getting drunk or high.
2. An untreated addict has no more control of his actions than you might if you were starving. In the grip of an addiction, your loved one's previously held standards and principles no longer apply.
3. Addicts act without thinking of the consequences that their behaviour has on themselves or on others, whether the consequences are immediate or way down the road.
4. All an addict really ever wants is to get and stay drunk and high, preferably both, and also look normal while doing that. The addict knows, however, that he is putting up a front while he feels deep shame inside.
5. Think of the addiction as an entity that has taken your loved one over. And because an addiction's *only purpose* is to feed itself, it uses a wide array of strategies, hijacking the addict's intelligence, skills, and relationships.
6. It is almost impossible to not take the things that the addict does personally, but when you see them as symptoms of the disease - the addiction - at work, as opposed to actions of evil intent on the part of your loved one, some of the burden is lifted, and you can then go forward with your own healing.