

ASK ERICA

ERICA J. BURNS, MA

Are You A Fill-in-the-Blank-Aholic?

Do you or anyone you know struggle with too much drinking, drugging, eating, spending, looking at porno, gambling, or other behaviors that are harmful or even self destructive? Do you wonder why you or they do these things knowing the hazards and the painful consequences? Do you wonder if you or they are truly addicted?

The term “addiction” is used quite freely these days, with people saying they are addicted to everything from shoes to exercise. It is often phrased in terms of being a something-aholic, such as a workaholic or a chocoholic. Sometimes this is said in jest and at other times, these are serious concerns.

Generally, repetitive behaviors are only an addiction if they are harmful to a person in some way. If one's behavior affects their emotional or psychological well being or their emotional or intellectual development or their relationships or physical health then they may be struggling with addiction on some level. If you frequently leave one romantic relationship as soon as the rapture starts to fade to move to another one, you may be addicted to love or to sex. If you feel that you must exercise daily despite physical injury you may be addicted to exercise. If you eat foods that you know are not good for you despite having medical conditions that may be life threatening, you may be addicted to food.

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM), the American Psychiatric Association's text for diagnosing psychological disorders, delineates between Abuse and Dependence when diagnosing substance addiction. The criteria for Abuse includes frequent using that causes someone to neglect responsibilities in areas such as work, school, parenting, etc. Other signs of abuse include continuing to use in situations where it's physically hazardous such as driving under the influence, repeated legal problems and ongoing social difficulties, such as arguments with spouse, physical fights, etc. Abuse has developed into Dependence when someone goes on to have symptoms of withdrawal, such as hangovers, develops a tolerance so that they now require more of a substance to attain the same high, continues to use even when they know it is causing them harm and uses more than they intended to.

Addictions begin when someone starts to use a substance or a behavior to obtain relief from some sort of emotional or physical pain. Addictive behavior is often called a “disease” because it is progressive, chronic and often fatal. As with other diseases, the person afflicted is not consciously choosing to have the disease of addiction. As the person continues to “use” the behavior or the substance for relief they are usually not aware that they are becoming dependent on it. This is called “denial” and the addict often truly does not know or believe that they have a problem. Providing people and especially young people with information about addiction can go a long way to helping them to avoid moving from doing something for relief, to abusing it, to becoming dependent upon it.

If you think you have an addiction problem, there is plenty of help available. You might begin by doing some research on the internet to see if you meet the criteria for addiction to your substance or behavior. If you find that it is likely that you have a problem but you still have questions about it, you might contact a licensed addictions professional. Depending on the extent of your problem it is often most helpful to have some type of support group to recover from an addiction. An addictions therapist

can be a very valuable resource, however, you may also need the added support of a recovery community.

If you are fairly certain that you do have a problem you might check out a 12 Step program. 12 Step programs are free support programs which are led by one's peers. Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) was the first 12 Step program. It was founded in 1935 and today there are numerous other 12 Step programs including Al Anon (for friends and family of alcoholics), CODA (for codependents), Sex Addicts Anonymous (SAA), Overeaters Anonymous (OA), Anorexics and Bulimics Anonymous (ABA), Gamblers Anonymous (GA), Nicotine Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous (NA), Debtors Anonymous (DA) and many many more. Most of these programs can be found on line and if there are not many meetings where you live you can often connect with meetings by telephone. There is a spiritual component to 12 Step groups but they do not have any specific religious orientation so no matter what your faith (or lack thereof) you are welcome there.

If you find that you are unable to stop your addictive behaviors there are excellent programs available for both outpatient and inpatient treatment.

Finally, if you are someone who cares for or is concerned about someone struggling with an addiction, you also can benefit from some help. It is helpful to know that your addict is not doing whatever they are doing in order to hurt you. They are doing it because their search for relief has developed into a disease. Getting some education on the nature of their problem can be helpful to you. You need to know that you did not cause their problem and you cannot cure them. You can benefit from learning about healthy boundaries and you may benefit significantly from attending Al Anon or CODA meetings and meeting with an addictions counselor yourself. Lastly, if you are the partner of an addict, know that you chose them for a reason. Perhaps you have your own addiction, or you are working out something from your own childhood (an addicted parent perhaps).

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If you would like to submit questions for her to answer in this column, please submit them to ericajburns@silverstar.com.