



Addiction



“It started as something I did to feel more in control, but it ended up taking control of me.”

Addiction will probably affect all of us in one way or another – either personally or through a family member or friend. It certainly affects society as a whole and the church as part of that society. In a group of 100 people, on average there may be 19 people chemically addicted to nicotine, six people addicted to alcohol and one to other drugs. People may also become psychologically addicted to pornography, gambling or food: anything that has an instant reward attached can become addictive.

What is addiction?

When a person is addicted to something, certain behaviours tend to go with it, including some or all of these:

- Doing something they know is harmful but are unable to stop.
- Needing a gradually increasing amount of the activity or substance to produce the same effect and satisfy the drive for it.
- Craving for the substance or activity that occupies much of their mind.
- Withdrawal symptoms when not able to indulge in the activity or substance. These can be physical (especially in cases of chemical addiction) or psychological – and are often a mixture of both.
- Pursuing the activity or using the substance to the exclusion of other important activities and despite evidence of harm.
- Actively seeking out what they are addicted to, and engaging in uncharacteristic and damaging behaviour as a result.

What causes addiction?

There is no simple single cause for addiction, which can happen to anyone. There does not need to be an identifiable cause for people to find themselves suffering from this very destructive illness.

Sometimes there can be evidence of a genetic link in families but trauma and loss, particularly in childhood and adolescence, can increase risk. Peer group pressure and easy availability of a substance or activity can start an addiction.

Mental health problems and addiction often happen together – sometimes the mental illness comes first, sometimes the addiction does; it may be impossible to tell. Some substances and activities are more addictive than others and often people describe going from one addiction to another.



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What are the consequences of addiction?

Some addictions are more destructive than others. Common consequences of drug and alcohol-based addictions include: physical and mental health problems, relationship and family breakdown, neglect of self and/or others, poverty and debt, homelessness, unemployment, offending (including violence) and imprisonment, poor self-worth and hopelessness. Other addictions can cause many of these as well.

Can it be treated?

Yes! Treatment is available for drug, alcohol and nicotine addictions in particular. Recovery from addiction is generally a long-term prospect rather than a short-term fix, needing specialised help that can include medical treatment and talking therapies as well as learning new behaviours and forming new relationships. This may involve detoxification and rehabilitation – at home or in a residential setting – and prescribed medication.

Community drug and alcohol services will be available locally and people can self refer or go through a health professional such as their GP. Peer support groups can also be very useful, including Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous and many other similar groups. Another type of self-help group, called Smart Recovery, uses a non-spiritual ethos and is a useful alternative for some.

Other addictions such as gambling and pornography are not as well catered for in the NHS, but many local or national self-help groups are available. The number of church-based ministries and courses is increasing in an attempt to plug some of the gaps and also provide high quality care for people.

What about faith?

Being a Christian does not offer immunity to addiction. There will be a significant number of addicted people in churches, although often hidden due to shame or denial and perhaps the feeling that they might be looked down upon, or judged. Supporting those struggling with addictions is also an important part of outreach and mission.

Addiction is the great equaliser: we have all sinned and fall short of the glory of God – and we have also all been tempted and been weak. We should not judge others for their weak areas: Jesus had some firm things to say about judging others and casting stones (John 8:1-11).



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One of the most important factors in recovery is for someone to be surrounded by people who will care and help them appropriately. The church community should be ideal for this – but it needs to be equipped to be competent and compassionate in helping people with addictions. In this context, good leadership, prayer and practical support are essential. The church can even be expert – see this example (www.keysuk.org) from Brighton.

Addiction can be overcome and the person restored to fullness of life and hope for the future. There are many people who have recovered from many forms of addiction who can testify that this is true.

➔ Helpful links:

Alcoholics Anonymous and the 12 steps:

➔ <https://tinyurl.com/aa-the-12-steps>

For a useful overview of addictions and the stages of change:

➔ <https://tinyurl.com/addictions-an-overview>

A number of articles about addiction on the Christian Medical Fellowship website:

➔ www.cmf.org.uk/advocacy/clinical-practice/addiction