



## SESSION 7: ADDICTION – DISEASE OR A CHOICE?



Now that we know that addiction has a definite effect on body, soul and mind, and cannot simply be reduced to substance use, chemically caused by drugs and alcohol in the body alone, we will with each session, break down the complex biophysical and spiritual disorder with many other interlocking conditions and mechanisms. However, the heart of an addiction problem is a deep disconnection from God, whatever that may be. The problem could be a sense of purpose, a lack of self-actualisation, a breakdown in connection and/or relationships with others, etc. To fully recover from addiction, we must understand and have clarity in all areas, to strengthen the body, heal the mind (renewing of the mind) and reconnect to God spiritually.

In order to find a solution, the first thing we need to determine is whether addiction is a choice or a disease.

We saw in Session six, that we must uncover how addiction has a physical impact, a spiritual impact, and a mental impact. Different people use different things to find help, and different things help different people to break free. However, when we consider all three parts of man, it would make it easier to understand which part of us needs to be taken care of. The point is that recovery which includes spiritual, mental, and physical feeding to man will and can lead to a bulletproof success rate.

Let us look at what the norm believes:

Many people, scientists, psychiatrists, doctors, clinicians, and rehabs believe that addiction is a disease commonly known as a substance use disorder. This is a complex disease of the brain and body that involves the compulsive use of one or more substances. A person who uses substances exposes their brain to a tremendous amount of brain chemicals called neurotransmitters. The brain naturally releases neurotransmitters like dopamine to reward behaviour and encourage you to repeat certain behaviours to release the same amount of dopamine. It is factual that drug use

influences the brain and should not be overlooked as it takes a good deal of work for the brain to get back to its normal state. The more drugs or alcohol taken, the more disruptive it is to the brain.

After partaking in many programmes, I came to a point where I had to make a choice to either agree or disagree whether or not addiction is a disease. I concluded that saying addiction is a disease, or that addiction is a choice, both fall short in their statements and have merits. Labelling addiction as a disease removes personal responsibility, leaving an open door for relapse and allowing addicts to continue using. Diseases tend to assume that we cannot help ourselves, which is not entirely true. Why, because as an addict after having our first hit or fix we lose the ability to control our intake. It is uncommon to stop using after the first one. It is like they say in NA. One too many, a thousand is never enough. Therefore, it is of paramount importance that we must stop the thought of having or taking a drug before the first hit or fix.

The complex question of whether addiction is a disease or a choice can be mind-baffling. Substance abuse can have negative effects on the brain. However, when a person abstains from substance abuse, their brain can repair itself over time. In contrast, many diseases cannot be cured without medical assistance, which requires medical professionals to manage them. The addiction started with a choice; it didn't start as a disease. The fact remains that a person doesn't choose to have cancer or heart disease, but they choose to use their first drug, and even though life sometimes deals us a hand where we feel we didn't have a choice, particularly with emotional underdevelopment or limited understanding, it still began with a choice. On the other hand, many rehabs and institutions treat addiction with medication, while the feel of it is that they are replacing one drug with another. Where is the sense in that? Medication can be used as a crutch to help overcome the worst of detox and withdrawal, and some of us will need lifelong medication for the damage we have done to our bodies, but to treat addiction with medication only, I firmly believe it is not a lifelong solution.

To say addiction is a choice, we remove the fact that the brain physically transforms and that no biochemistry is involved when using drugs.

Think about this; when you have been sober for a week and then start using again, there is a stream of choices involved. In lesson six we discussed the following choices to be made as an example:

A crack addict for instance about to pick up a hit, must choose whether he/she wants to pick it up or not, decide/choose where the money will come from. He/she must choose which dealer to use. He/she must choose how they will get to the dealer, whether he/she will walk, run, or use their own vehicle or public transport, the bus or taxi. A person picking up the drug must

decide how much money to spend and where he will have their first hit. When he/she has the first hit, will he/she use a R25, R50, or R100 piece? Can you see how much choice is involved into picking up one single hit?

In my opinion, addiction is a choice, even though it is a sad choice with negative implications. It is sadly true that substance abusers will struggle to remain sober for as long as they live. They cannot pick up that same drug again. However, it still remains a choice if we choose to pick it up or not.

## ASPECTS OF ADDICTION TO KEEP IN MIND

### Denial

**According to the oxford dictionary, denial means the following:**

- *A statement that says something is not true or does not exist.*  
This can refer to the addicts repeated denial that he/she has a problem, irrespective of facing negative consequences where addiction cost him/her their job, their health, their home, their children, their loved ones and friends.
- *A refusal to accept that something unpleasant or painful is true*  
The addict can refuse to see the negative consequences for their actions.

We also have to keep in mind that family members can just as easily go into denial and pretend or overlook that their loved ones do not have a substance abuse or alcohol problem and the it has no impact on their lives.

*Ref: Online Oxford Dictionary*

### How is addiction defined?

Addiction is the continued involvement with a substance or an activity despite ongoing negative consequences.

*Ref: Online Oxford Dictionary*

### What is the difference between habit versus addiction

Habit is repeated behaviour in which the repetition may be unconscious. Compulsion is present if considerable discomfort is experienced if the behaviour is not performed.

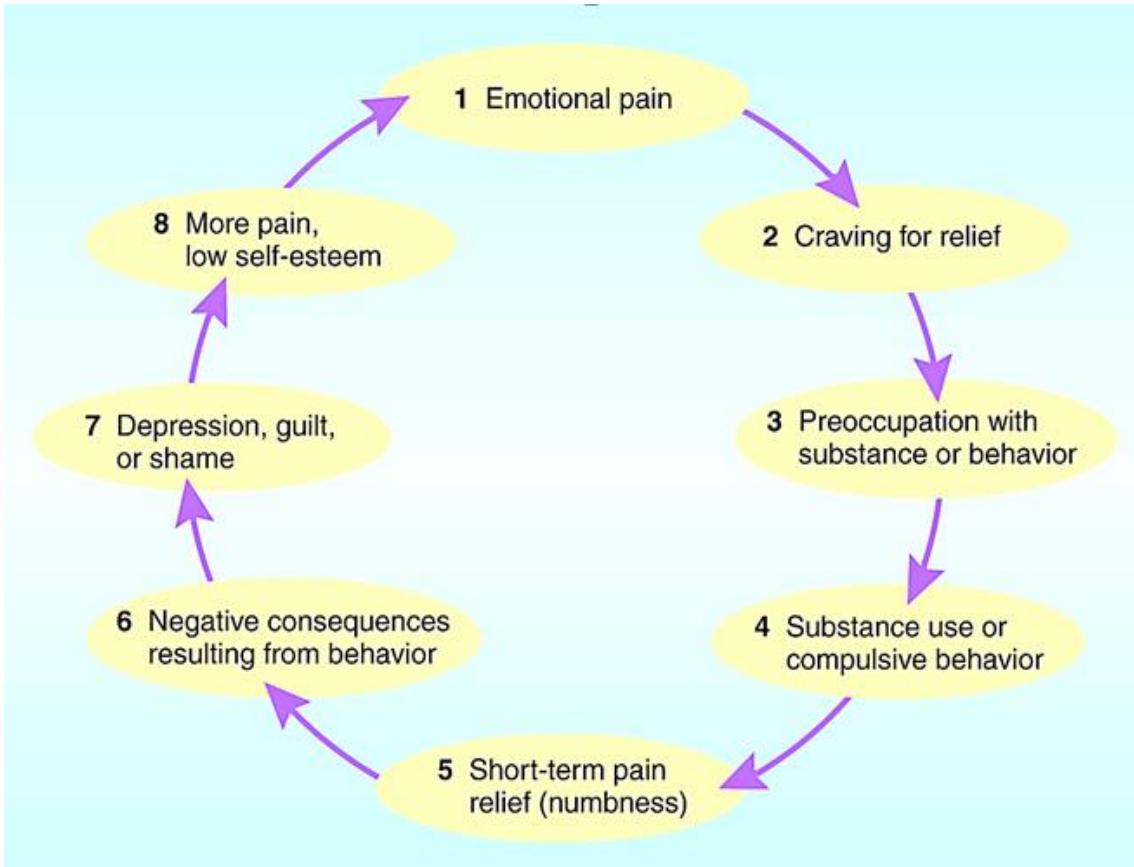
### What are the symptoms of addiction?

- Obsession
- Loss of control
- Negative consequences
- Denial

A substance abuser's mind is always obsessed and permanently consumed with wanting to or having to drug. Once the first hit/fix is taken the substance abuser seems to go into a rampage and loss of control over their actions and will seek out drugs or alcohol no matter the outcome.

In extreme cases like heroin use, the abuser will start feeling an intense illness just after a few hours of use and their body will tell the mind to get the next fix in order to not be sick or to feel normal. Also, many other addicts after prolonged use may feel dysfunctional if they do not use drugs. Many other drug withdrawals are mostly a mental fight. Despite of experiencing negative consequences, he/she will find it hard to quit drugs. Substance abusers have the habit of minimizing or denying that they have a problem. More of these symptoms will be discussed as we continue working through the sessions.

**THE CYCLE OF PHYSIOLOGICAL ADDICTION**



**Ref: Picture from Christian Leaders Institute: Breaking the cycle of addiction**

Looking at the cycle of psychological addiction will help you understand how it affects the substance abuser on a spiritual level as well. Addiction mostly starts with emotional pain, whatever the cause may be and as human beings, we long for relief from whatever pain we may be experiencing. The abuser will start thinking of how to numb the pain, think of using drugs or

will reveal certain behaviour patterns that serve as warning lights that he/she is struggling. The next step is to start using a substance that relieves pain for a short time. The substance abuser will face negative consequences such as having family members or loved ones angry at him/her. He or she will also face disappointment, getting a warning for being absent on a Monday once again, etc. These consequences then bring forth depression, an overload of guilt and shame, and remorse about the pain and distress they have caused which will add to low self-esteem as his/her choice could have caused severe anger and resentment throughout his/her family, support group and friends. This then adds to more severe pain and the cycle restarts. As the cycle repeats, the more baggage you accumulate, the heavier the load becomes. Think about carrying a backpack. You got wounded and receive a backpack you must take around the course over and over again. Every time that you pass the starting point a stone will be added to your backpack to carry with you. How many times do you think you will get around the course before 1) you collapse or 2) you can no longer continue and decide to put down the entire backpack? Working on this material, we hope to get you to put down the entire backpack.



- How do you see addiction? Do you see it as a disease or a choice?
- Do you feel there is hope to work towards permanent sobriety?
- What things during active addiction did you do over and over again?
- What things did you try to remain sober, but got the same result?
- What do you think you need to do differently this time?
- What will make sobriety different this time?



Allow the members of the group to discuss and plan for themselves what they need to change or what they need to choose differently to remain sober. It may give you a lot of insight into each person if you let your group brainstorm their ideas. This will be valuable information to get to know each other better