



# Finding Freedom from Addiction

*Deepak Chopra, MD*

Many years ago when I was supervising an addictions unit at the Boston Veterans Administration Hospital, I had a patient with chronic obstructive lung disease who had been on a ventilator for two weeks. I finally weaned him off and two days later, I saw him outside the hospital smoking through his tracheotomy. I began to realize that addiction is one of the worst diseases of our civilization. It is prevalent at all levels of society and is directly and indirectly linked to all other diseases, including cardiovascular disease, many types of cancer, diabetes, and other illnesses.

Addiction to toxic behaviors, substances, relationships, and environments all create toxicity in the body, which can ultimately manifest as illness.

Human beings seem to have an infinite capacity to become addicted to almost anything. In addition to physical addictions such as the addiction to drugs, alcohol, tobacco, and food, there are a psychological and behavioral addictions, including the addiction to work, sex, exercise, gambling, surfing the internet, watching television, shopping, appearing young, suffering, creating drama, and trying to achieve perfection.

## Why Are So Many People Addicted?

Scientists and other experts have studied addiction for many years, yet its root cause remains the subject of intense debate. What has become clear to me is that addictions bring pleasure to people who cannot find it any other way. If you have a problem with alcohol or are addicted to cigarettes, food, or anything else, it is because at some point you associated pleasure, or at least relief, with the given substance or behavior. The goal of every behavior is comfort and inner peace. Whether you seek comfort through meditation, hugging your spouse, or drinking a martini, the intention is the same: we all engage in behaviors that relieve anxiety and help us feel more comfortable within ourselves.

## Childhood Roots of Addiction

Many people struggle with addictive behaviors that developed in response to difficult experiences in their early childhood. A comprehensive study led by Dr. Vincent Felitti and Dr. Robert Anda found strong evidence that children who experience adverse childhood experiences are much more likely to develop destructive compulsive behavior as adults. The ongoing Adverse Childhood Experiences Study—one of the largest scientific studies of its kind—involves more than 17,000 adult participants who became members of the Kaiser Permanente health care organization in San Diego between 1995 and 1997. Felitti and Anda defined these major categories of adverse childhood experiences:

- Physical abuse
- Emotional abuse
- Sexual abuse
- Emotional or physical neglect

- Exposure to domestic violence
- Exposure to substance abuse in the family
- Incarcerated household member
- Exposure to mental illness in the family
- Mother is treated violently
- Parental separation or divorce

The researchers found a strong correlation between the number of adverse childhood experiences participants reported and the development of a wide range of physical, emotional, and social problems, including depression, obesity, alcoholism, smoking, and substance abuse.

People develop addictions for a reason, and often that reason has its roots in childhood. Even if you didn't experience such blatantly traumatic events as abuse or violence, you may have grown up with parents or caregivers who were remove, unavailable, or unable to meet your fundamental needs for understanding, comfort, approval, acceptance, attention, and love.

As a child, you had a limited repertoire of ways to express your dissatisfaction. When your needs weren't met, you may have acted out and thrown a tantrum, or pouted and become withdrawn. If your needs continued to be unmet, you may have begun to seek out other ways to soothe your feelings of abandonment. As you were growing up, maybe you discovered that drinking a few beers or smoking a joint offered temporary relief, leaving you with a net "positive" impression in your consciousness. Impressions in consciousness give rise to desires, and your desire for relief spurred you to repeat the behavior into order to regain the experience that initially brought you pleasure or relief.

With each indulgence, the experience recruits more neural networks in the brain to reinforce the pattern. At the same time, relationships and activities that reinforce the habit become more dominant over those that do not. For example, you may start choosing to spend more time in places that reinforce your habit (bars, clubs, casinos, shopping malls), deepening the impressions that give rise to desires. This is how repeated experiences generate psychological and physiological patterns that deepen the habits of behavior.

To heal an addiction, you first need to recognize the destructive patterns of conditioned behavior that are dominating your life. When you're caught in a maze, you may not be able to find your way out if you wander aimlessly around the web. The best way to escape is to find a new perspective outside and above the entrapment you unknowingly created.

## **Seven Steps to Lasting Change**

Expanding awareness through knowledge and experience is the key to the door of freedom. In working with many people struggling with addiction, my colleague David Simon and I became convinced that the following actions are crucial in creating lasting change:

1. Make a commitment to transformation. Ask yourself, *Am I ready to change?* If your answer is yes, then set your intention and don't allow distractions to pull you off course.
2. Make a commitment not to repeat the mistakes of the past. Life is an evolutionary process, so this step isn't about wasting time or energy harshly judging yourself. Instead, focus your intentions on letting go of past behaviors and focusing your attention on healing and awakening.

3. Face the harsh reality of the present. When you're lost, you need to determine, as best you can, where you are. You may feel unhappy or distressed about your current state, but this is your reality for now. Accepting it while recognizing your capacity to change is the beginning of healing.
4. See the infinite possibilities in the present moment. The universe is infinitely creative. As an expression of the universe, we also have an unimaginable capacity to create something new. Set a different intention, make new choices, and new possibilities will emerge.
5. Envision where you want to be. Your intentions and desires propel your thoughts, feelings, words, and actions. Imagine a life filled with the peace, love, and joy that you deserve.
6. Ask yourself what choices you need to make to fulfill your vision. Imagine that each choice orchestrates a cascade of consequence. Envision the choices that have the greatest likelihood of manifesting the life you want to lead.
7. Create an action to execute your choices. For your world to change, you need to act on your intentions. Envision what you want to see unfold and begin to take small steps to bring you closer to fulfillment. Be the change you want to see in your life.

## About the Author

Deepak Chopra, M.D., F.A.C.P., is the co-founder of the Chopra Center for Wellbeing, the founder of the Chopra Foundation, and a world-renowned pioneer in integrative medicine and personal transformation. He is board certified in internal medicine, endocrinology, and metabolism. He is a Fellow of the American College of Physicians, a member of the American Association of Clinical Endocrinologists, and a clinical professor in the Family Medicine and Public Health Department at the University of California, San Diego.

He is the author of more than 85 books translated into over 43 languages, including numerous New York Times bestsellers. His recent books include *You Are the Universe*, co-authored with Menas Kafatos, Ph.D.; *Quantum Healing (Revised and Updated): Exploring the Frontiers of Mind/ Body Medicine*; and *The Healing Self: A Revolutionary New Plan to Supercharge Your Immunity and Stay Well for Life*, co-authored with Rudolph Tanzi, Ph.D.