

Process Addiction

■ by Kim Pronoitis, MA, LCPC



Process addiction—also known as behavioral addiction—is any addiction excluding drugs and alcohol where a person becomes dependent on a behavior. Behaviors such as eating, sex, pornography, shopping, gambling, video games/gaming, and yes, even work have become an issue for many. Process addictions can harm a person’s physical health, end primary relationships, and cause legal, financial, and mental health problems.

When we engage in behaviors repeatedly despite the negative consequences, it can become addictive. When addicted to a behavior, the reward system in our brain (pleasure principle) becomes stimulated, releasing the neurotransmitter dopamine, which is similar to what happens with a substance addiction. As professionals, we look at an addiction - whether substance or process - as a brain disease. The prevailing view is that process addictions share many commonalities with substance addictions, including co-occurring mental health issues such as anxiety and depression. Dealing with mental health issues can be difficult and it’s not uncommon for one to self-medicate with addictive behaviors to feel better.

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The difference between behavior addiction and substance addiction is that behaviors affect the brain indirectly whereas substance addictions actually physically change the brain’s neurotransmitters. Many narcotics and alcohol, for example, cross the brain barrier much quicker, flooding the reward system with the neurotransmitter dopamine which is highly addictive.

WHAT CAUSES ADDICTION

Although there can be many reasons for using drugs and alcohol, or engaging in behaviors, addiction is present in the brain’s reward system even before one engages in behaviors or uses substances. Knowing if we are predisposed by looking at family history is beneficial. Often times we see addictions run in family systems across different generations, whether behavioral or substance-related. I will ask clients during an initial counseling session if addiction runs in their family, and they often will say “no”, but through the therapeutic process we often find differently.

Our environment also influences how we behave and how we learn to cope. Along with the addiction itself, there are many other behaviors that coincide. Co-dependence is not uncommon and is also detrimental in a family system where addiction is present. This may include enabling the addict – for example, making excuses for them, which allows the addiction to continue with no consequences and the addict to stay in denial. More often than not, if we grew up in a codependent family system, we attract what we feel comfortable with, and seek this out in a mate, and so the cycle continues.

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Our culture makes it very easy to have many things at our fingertips. We have what I like to call “societal ADD,” where we are continually stimulating the brain and not being still. Not having to wait for things is not congruent with the virtue of patience, therefore making it easier for addictions to develop – these behaviors may temporarily relieve symptoms, but don’t address the root cause of the stress. I often ask my clients in therapy if they can be still – it has proven difficult for many. Even the Lord asks us to be still and wait upon him (Psalm 37:7).

SOME SYMPTOMS OF PROCESS ADDICTIONS

- defensiveness
- denial
- feelings of guilt
- lying
- hiding behavior
- craving and inability to resist the behavior
- family, work, financial and interpersonal relationships affected by engaging in the behavior
- irritability when not able to engage (withdraw)
- decrease in the pleasure of the activity over time (tolerance - pushing the boundaries)
- isolating oneself for the behavior

GETTING HELP

Most process addictions are treated much like substance addiction, where the goal is abstinence. However, with process addictions involving behaviors like eating or sex, the therapeutic process includes much self-exploration to gain a better understanding of triggers and establishing very specific boundaries. Cognitive Behavioral Therapy and understanding our thinking process gives us the perspective we need to change and replace unhealthy coping behaviors.



There is a spiritual basis to recovery – something bigger than ourselves – our Lord God. When you know who God is, you discover who you are – sometimes we have to let Jesus take the wheel, to let go and let God. Sounds like such a simple concept, but is very difficult as many of us like to be in control. I encourage my clients to reflect on living the Serenity Prayer.

In addition to therapy, I often recommend the 12 Steps, a program with proven success since the late 1930s. Celebrate Recovery (CR) is a Christian based 12 step group program with the same foundational principles as the original AA program. Addiction can be a very lonely issue and I have found that group support is very helpful because we don’t feel as alone and we find that others have experienced many of the same issues. As Christians, we know we are not meant to be alone, especially in our struggles. Reaching out for help is the first step. ■



Kim Pronoitis is a Licensed Clinical Professional Counselor and sees clients in our Tinley Park, IL location.

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