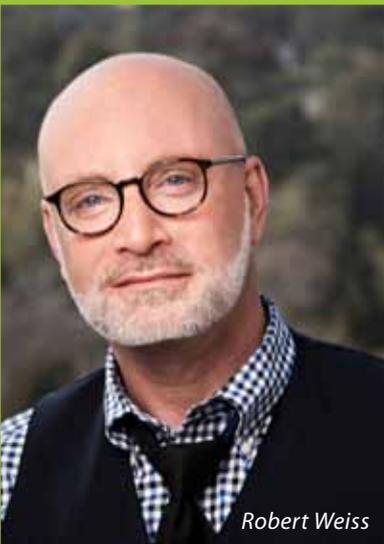


ONE DAY AT A TIME

Identifying addiction triggers

By Robert Weiss LCSW, CSAT-S



Robert Weiss

Jonathan is a 45-year-old structural engineer. He has been in recovery for both sex addiction and meth/cocaine addiction for just under a year. Jonathan is serious about his recovery and about saving his marriage. Unfortunately, his office is located in a part of town that forces him to drive through a seedy neighbourhood littered with strip clubs, drug dealers, and prostitutes. On his good days, he doesn't even think about these temptations when he drives past. However, if he and his wife have been arguing, or he's had a tough day at work, or he simply woke up on the wrong side of the bed, he finds that he can think of nothing else. On two occasions he has "slipped" on his way home from work – once finding himself high on cocaine in a strip club, another time ending up in the back seat of his car with a meth-addicted prostitute. He was truthful with his wife about both slips, and whilst she was grateful for his honesty, her patience is wearing thin. Meanwhile, Jonathan can't understand why he's had these moments of weakness when he's working so hard to heal from his addictions and to rebuild relationship trust with his wife.

From an addiction perspective,



Jonathan's slips have occurred primarily because he has failed to recognize the potency of certain "triggers" for his addictions. He has not acknowledged the thoughts, feelings, and external influences (people, places, and things) that precipitate his desire to get high and act out sexually. A few of these triggers include fighting with his wife, work-related frustrations, and visual reminders of his active addiction. When Jonathan doesn't remain aware of these triggers and actively work to avoid or counteract them, or when he is slammed by multiple triggers at once, his ability to make sound, recovery-based choices decreases. The perception of powerlessness is apparent in the language he uses to describe his slips – "finding himself" in a strip club, "ending up" with a prostitute. That is very different than "choosing" or "making a conscious decision" to do something.

Regrettably, anything (internal or external) that triggers an addict to remember the long-lost pleasure of active addiction is a potential precursor for relapse. **Internal triggers** typically involve emotional (or sometimes physical) discomfort like depression, shame, anxiety, anger, fear, guilt, remorse, boredom, etc. For instance, if/when a married sex addict's spouse is away for a few days, he or she might feel lonely and abandoned. This emotional discomfort might trigger a desire to act out sexually. **External triggers** can be people, places, things, and/or events. For instance, when a sex addict sees an old acting out partner, he or she might be triggered to act out sexually.

Addicts must also deal with **intertwined triggers** (triggers that are both external and internal). For instance, when a sex and stimulant

addict argues with his or her spouse or has a bad day at work (an external trigger) he or she is likely to experience emotional discomfort (an internal trigger), with both triggers causing a desire to act out. And this desire may be exacerbated by visual triggers that remind the addict of his or her addiction (such as driving past strip clubs, prostitutes, and drug dealers).

Interestingly, not all triggers are negative in nature. Sometimes material successes and positive emotions will evoke a desire to celebrate and thus a desire to drink, use drugs, act out sexually, gamble, spend, etc. For sex addicts, a few of the more **common internal triggers** are:

- Unresolved resentments and anger
- Loneliness, fear, boredom, anxiety, shame, stress, frustration
- An unmet need for validation and/or affection
- Low self-esteem
- Feeling unappreciated
- Sadness and/or grief

For sex addicts, a few of the more **common external triggers** are:

- Unstructured time alone
- Unexpected losses or tragedies
- Drug and/or alcohol abuse
- Conflict or relationship breakups
- Travel (especially alone)
- Unexpected life changes (job, home situation, transportation, etc.)

- Highly stimulating positive experiences
- Unexpected exposure to sexual stimuli (driving past a prostitute, seeing a sexy billboard, encountering an attractive person, etc.)
- Trouble within the family (like a child struggling at school)
- Financial insecurity
- An emotionally or physically unavailable spouse

Both of the above lists could be extended indefinitely. Unfortunately, triggers cannot easily be avoided. Think about alcoholics driving past billboard ads for beer, scotch, and vodka. Think about drug addicts watching television crime dramas where the "perps" are selling or using drugs. Think about all of the attractive people (i.e., potential sexual partners) that a sex addict sees on a daily basis. Then think about any addict at all dealing with the rollercoaster of life and the emotions it induces. Triggers are everywhere, and there is nothing that addicts can do about that fact beyond learning to recognize them and deal with them in healthy ways such as thought stopping, diversion, self-nurturance and using support systems. One day at a time.

Robert Weiss LCSW, CSAT-S is Senior Vice President of National Clinical Development for Elements Behavioral Health. He is also an internationally acknowledged clinician and author of several highly regarded books. For more information please visit his website at robertweissmsw.com

Hear Robert speak on "sexual evolution, the effect of digital and social media on relationship intimacy and addiction" - at the launch of the new face of Elim Clinic on the 15th March 2016.

The opposite of addiction is MEANINGFUL CONNECTION

By Sorika de Swardt – Addiction Consultant at Elim Clinic.



Sorika de Swardt

In the book "Chasing the Scream", British journalist Johann Hari discuss the wealth of research into the underlying causes and treatments of addiction. After a three year journey he concludes that the opposite of addiction is not necessarily sobriety, its connection. In the field of addiction we have known for a while that a person uses a substance to either chase pleasure or avoid pain. Hari goes further when he suggests that addiction is not about the pleasurable effects of substances, it's about the user's inability to connect in healthy ways with other human beings and with themselves.

This seems contrary to what most people believe about substance abuse. In general, people think that the driving force behind the use of cocaine, alcohol, heroin etc. has to do with the receptors in our bodies that attach to the chemical hooks in the drug. This subsequently triggers a flood release of dopamine, giving us intense feelings of pleasure. It feels so good that we want to duplicate the feeling and therefore we keep on doing it. Eventually the brain rewires and addiction takes hold. But this is not the full picture. We know that not everybody who uses alcohol will become an alcoholic, and not everyone who ingests opiates (even via prescription) ends up injecting heroin.

Certainly the experience of pleasure plays a role, because it opens the doorway to addiction. But it is also clear that over time, tolerance builds and a person's initial experience of pleasure decreases. So if it is not only about the pleasurable effects of the drug or about the escape and numbing of pain, what is it then that makes one user an addict and not the other.

This is a question that scientists like Bruce Alexander explored when he looked at the results of studies in which rats were placed in empty cages, alone, with two water bottles to choose from – one with pure water, the other with heroin-infused water. Those experiments showed that as time passed these rats would get hooked on, and eventually overdose from heroin. Researchers unsurprisingly therefore concluded that the potential of extreme pleasure, in itself, is addictive.

In hindsight, Alexander was bothered with the fact that these rats were all isolated in these small cages with no potential for any other stimulation than the heroin infused water. Surely if the rats had a bit more to do they may not be so obsessed with the heroin water? So, Alexander created what was called "Rat Park". Rat Park was a cage approximately 200 times larger than the typical small isolation cage, with Hamster-wheels and multi-coloured balls to play with, plenty of tasty food to eat, and spaces for mating and raising litters. He put 20 rats (of both genders) into the cage and finally he added one bottle of heroin water to see what would happen.

So, what happened? In Rat Park, the rats tried the heroin once or twice and then lost interest. They were much more interested in typical communal rat activities such as playing, fighting, eating, and mating.

When adding social stimulation and connection, the addictive and compulsive behaviour of the rats essentially disappeared. Humans, much like those rats in Rat Park, also need social stimulation, connection, diversion and all the basic needs to be met. In addition we also need to be able to trust and attach emotionally. Countless research findings suggest that when a person don't experience secure attachments to their primary care-givers in early life, or to significant others in later life, they are more susceptible to addiction. Rat Park tells us that addiction is therefore also an adaptation to your environment and to the lack of meaningful connection to self and others.

Robert Weiss reflects on the dilemma of the addict who lacks meaningful connection when he says "the good news is that people with insecure attachment styles are not locked into this approach for life. With proper guidance and a fair amount of conscious effort the individuals who were not graced with secure attachment in childhood (and therefore the ability to easily connect in adulthood) can learn to securely attach".

It is possible to develop something called "earned security" through time, therapy, support groups, and various other healthy and healing relationships. For addicts it would be insufficient to just

add stimulation, jobs and hobbies because the need to meaningfully connect, emotionally attach and trust another person is part of what fills the void. This is why most treatment programmes highlight the importance of support systems for the recovering addict. We are not just talking about connecting to people in general because then you can just as well become your dealer's best friend. Instead, it's important to connect in a meaningful way with supportive, empathic, reliable and consistent people.

Sobriety should not be thrown to the wind in light of the findings in Johann Hari's book (Chasing the Scream), instead sobriety can be enriched and strengthened through meaningful connection with ourselves, others and our Higher Power. Maybe we needed Rat Park to remind us that attachment is our first and primal need and without it, there will always be a void

Acknowledgements

- i. Johann Hari (2015). Chasing the Scream: The First and Last Days of the War on Drugs. Bloomsbury.
- ii. Alexander, B. K., Beyerstein, B. L., Hadaway, P. F., & Coombs, R. B. (1981). Effect of early and later colony housing on oral ingestion of morphine in rats. *Pharmacology Biochemistry and Behavior*, 15(4), 571-576.
- iii. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/love-and-sex-in-the-digital-age/201509/the-opposite-addiction-is-connection/Robert-Weiss>



ONE DAY AT A TIME

By Sorika de Swardt – Addiction Consultant at Elim Clinic.

Shahram Heshmat Ph.D describes willpower as a resource that can get depleted through things like stress, ego-depletion, busyness, cognitive overloading etc. According to the scarce-resource model, acts of self-control draws from a limited resource of willpower that becomes depleted over time, just as a muscle becomes tired after a period of exertion. When resources are depleted, people tend to act on impulse and are more likely to be swayed by their desires, urges, and cravings, although they may regret it in the long run.

So if I did not sleep well last night, resisted dessert at lunch and did not snap at a rude driver on my way home, my willpower might be depleted by the time I get home. This would explain why we can sometimes not cope with a challenge today whilst we were able to cope with the exact same challenge yesterday.

If willpower can become depleted, there are a couple of concerning questions for me.

1. What can deplete my willpower to the extent that I feel I have little or no self-control left?

Robert Weiss alludes to the importance of identifying and understanding the things that trigger us. When we are triggered, we have to spend a lot of willpower to not give in to the cravings that follow a trigger. As individuals we will have some general and some unique triggers and we need to identify these to be able to avoid or manage them. Often it is done by looking at previous slips, lapses and relapses but luckily it can also be done in treatment simply by learning to listen to our bodies and from the experience of others. Triggers and cravings are only two of the things that will tap into our willpower. Some of the others are known as HALT, i.e. hunger, anger, loneliness and tiredness. They really eat into our levels of willpower, making us vulnerable to slips and lapses.

2. Secondly I would like to know what I can do when I realize that I am running on empty with my willpower?

- Here Johan Hari and Rat Park gives us some ideas. Meaningful activities recharges our batteries and fuels our willpower.
- A clear vision for our recovery as well as a detailed action plan will also add to the willpower surplus tank.
- When we feel we are running on empty, meaningful connection with the right

people will help fill the void.

- A connection with God will also go a long way towards rejuvenation and serenity as so beautifully explained in Psalm 23.
- Xenia Ayiotis refers to mindfulness in her article as amongst other things “about befriending who we are already. As we befriend the parts of us that we don’t like, it will become easier to befriend others who we find challenging”. And through that we are able to connect with more people and also gain from their experiences.

It is a little bit scary to think that it takes so much effort to muster up the willpower for sobriety and then it can so easily be depleted. When we think too far ahead about all of the triggers, cravings, years in recovery and high risk situations, we can easily get overwhelmed. But we don’t have to only bargain on willpower to keep us in recovery. The good news is that every tank is refillable, and when we make use of our personal recovery plan, vision, resources, meaningful activities, meaningful connections, mindfulness and serenity available to us, we will not be running on empty. Recovery is a journey we take one day at a time, and all we really need, is enough willpower for today.



MINDFUL CONNECTION

By Xenia Ayiotis – Mindful Eating Coach



Xenia Ayiotis

Mindfulness is a buzz-word at the moment but what exactly is mindfulness? Many people have an idea that mindfulness is about being centred, quiet, relaxed, behaving in a calm and controlled way or not having a mind full of thoughts. That perception of mindfulness can be misleading.

Jon Kabat-Zinn is the founder of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction programme at the University of Massachusetts Medical Centre. According to him “Mindfulness means paying attention in a particular way; on purpose in the present moment and non-judgementally. The best way to capture moments is to pay attention. This is how we cultivate mindfulness. Mindfulness means being awake. It means knowing what you are doing”

Part of being mindful is accepting that it is very difficult and not always possible to pay attention for long and to be mindful all of the time. The nature of our mind is

to wander, distract, ruminate and lose ourselves in thought. In the same way our heart beats, so our mind produces thoughts. Part of mindfulness is to remember to gently bring our minds back to the present moment. If our mind wanders 100 times and we bring our mind back to the present 100 times then we are practicing mindfulness 100 times!

Sylvia Boorstein says: “Mindfulness is the aware, balanced acceptance of the present experience”. It isn’t more complicated than that. It is opening to or receiving the present moment, pleasant or unpleasant, just as it is, without either clinging to it or rejecting it.

Practising mindfulness has many benefits in different areas of life for example, how to manage physical or emotional pain, how to be with urges and compulsions without acting on them and how to stay connected with ourselves and other people.

Staying connected to ourselves is often a challenge and connection with people who we find difficult is even more challenging. Many of the relationships we have are with people that we are obliged to spend time with, not out of choice. Sometimes it’s in the work place or because our family and social circle demands it of us. It’s easier to feel connected to people we like and enjoy spending time with but what about the people that are challenging and trigger us – how do we manage those relationships?

All of our relationships (easy and pleasant, difficult and unpleasant and neutral) have the potential to enrich our lives in some way. When connecting with challenging people we have the choice to cultivate connection with ourselves or get caught up in resistance or in our preference or we can simply try, as best we can, just be with ourselves.

→ Continued on page 4

Here are some ways we can foster more mindful connections:

- 1. Be present and pay attention:** Pay attention to what is being said, your internal response or knee-jerk reaction. Become aware of your internal thoughts and judgements as you engage with that person.
- 2. Practice acceptance:** As best you can, accept the present interaction with curiosity and kindness for yourself and the other person.
- 3. Non-judgement:** Notice any judgements you have of the person or of yourself and your reactions. Try to let go of the judgement and if it's not possible, simply allow the judgement to be there.
- 4. Compassion:** Practise compassion for yourself and the other person. A reminder that we are all doing the best we can in each moment.
- 5. Loving kindness:** Wishing ourselves and others well through speaking out well wishes.

By practising being present, acceptance of each moment, non-judgement and compassion this can help create a feeling of connection to ourselves and to others. As Pema Chodron says "Mindfulness practice isn't about trying to throw ourselves away and become something better. It's about befriending who we are already". As we befriend the parts of us that we don't like, it will become easier to befriend others who we find challenging.

www.theartofmindfulness.com

THE SHEPHERD

By Amanda Richter – Pastoral Councillor at Elim Clinic

From the Book of Psalms, Psalm 23 stands out as a firm favourite for many of us. The image of God as our Shepherd comforts us during difficult times. Recently, I overheard someone referring to an acquaintance by saying that he not only knows the Psalm, but that he truly knows the Shepherd of the Psalm. What a beautiful expression to describe a child of God! In light of this, I want to share a post I received on Facebook that tells of the promises Psalm 23 holds for us as children of God. My hope is that it will inspire and give hope to those who feel like they are currently in the proverbial '...valley of the shadow of death...' that Psalm 23 talks about.



Amanda Richter



Psalm 23

The Lord is my Shepherd - *That's a Relationship.*

I shall not want - *That's Supply.*

He makes me to lie down in green pastures - *That's Rest.*

He leads me beside the still waters - *That's Refreshment.*

He restores my soul - *That's Healing.*

He leads me in the path of righteousness - *That's Guidance.*

For His name sake - *That's Purpose.*

Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death -
That's Testing.

I will fear no evil - *That's Protection.*

For Thou art with me - *That's Faithfulness.*

Thy rod and Thy staff will comfort me - *That's Discipline.*

Thou prepared a table before me in the presence of mine enemies - *That's Hope.*

Thou anointed my head with oil - *That's Consecration.*

My cup runs over - *That's Abundance.*

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life - *That's Blessings.*

And I will dwell in the house of the Lord - *That's Security.*

Forever - *That's Eternity.*

Forthcoming events

Come and join us for the launch of the "New face of Elim Clinic on the 15th March 2016. Put the date in your diary today. See attached flyer for more information.

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We thank our sponsors for their contributions and continued support.

- Mr Kallie Schoeman and Mr Kobus Fourie (Schoeman Boerdery)



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