

You can overcome your addiction

In our column and podcast series, Professor Sarah Niblock, CEO of the UK Council for Psychotherapy, explores real-life challenges that affect us all. This month, we look at addictions, from daily bad habits to more serious dependence, and how talking to a therapist can help us understand them better, in order to kick them for good

We are living in an age of addiction. In fact, it is so widespread that you are very lucky indeed if you are not touched by some kind of dependence. It can happen to you, a member of your family, your child's teacher, your family doctor or your next-door neighbour. Addiction doesn't discriminate.

It's a complete myth that drug addicts and substance abusers are homeless and unemployed. Despite his bubbly on-screen persona, it was a shock to many that TV presenter Ant McPartlin was struggling with prescription drug and alcohol addiction. McPartlin reportedly became hooked on painkillers following a serious knee injury in 2014 and a failed operation the following year.

A war, not a battle

Beating any addiction is a major achievement. If that's you, you have a lot to be proud of – but you still have some tough work ahead of you. Detox is only the start of a long process through which you'll learn to manage cravings and avoid a relapse. Psychotherapy is an essential step in identifying and addressing what might lie at the root cause of your addiction. In an interview with Oprah Winfrey, singer Fergie said: 'With any drug, everything is great at the beginning, and then your life slowly starts to spiral down... What got me through it was a lot of therapy, soul-searching and discovering why I took drugs in the first place, because that's really what it is [about].'

Regular exposure to addictive substances is difficult for us to avoid because it is ingrained and condoned in

everyday life. We only have to think of 'wine o'clock', which is everyday parlance and an accepted activity, not something that happens behind closed doors. That said, there is non-ingestive addictive behaviour, from overspending and social media to seemingly healthy practices, such as counting calories or exercising. When the behaviour starts to be compulsive and in control of our lives, it is far from innocent.

The difference between a habit and an addiction isn't always clear. Sometimes it depends on the mindset of the individual. Smoking can be both – in that one person might enjoy the occasional social cigarette while another lights up the first of many upon waking.

Clearly, with physical addiction there will be the need for a managed withdrawal – but chances are that without therapeutic support for any addiction, chemical or behavioural, psychological dependence will remain. Change is always possible with the right treatment and continued support, provided we are willing to get that help for as long as is necessary.

To be truly successful in recovery, it is crucial to address the mental, emotional and psychological aspects of our addiction. It cannot be blamed on our bodies or genetics alone. Many addicts have an underlying mental health issue or have experienced some type of trauma in life that ultimately led them to find refuge in mind-altering substances or harmful activities. Even when the root causes are not as severe as a serious mental illness or deep



PHOTOGRAPH: PAL HANSEN. HAIR AND MAKE-UP: CARL STANLEY

trauma, there are psychological underpinnings. By addressing those, the person can begin to understand their behaviour and choices and start to make changes.

Understand to heal

Psychotherapy allows us to comprehend the many layers of complexity that surround addiction and self-destructive behaviour, which often makes it easier to complete treatment. Therapy can also help us identify and address the cues and triggers to relapse, such as stress, cues in the environment, such as going to a pub, and in our social networks, which may be toxic.

Addiction not only affects the person with the problem but has a profound effect on their families, partners, colleagues and even society as a whole. Psychotherapists work with individuals, couples and groups in many life-changing ways, healing the self and rebuilding fractured relationships.

By gaining a full understanding of our addiction, behaviour and why we find ourselves in our current situation, we're far more likely to make a successful and long-term recovery.

ASK THE EXPERT...

Richard Nicholls is a psychotherapist, hypnotherapist and author of '15 Minutes To Happiness'



Q How do we know we're addicted to 'harmless' activities like social media, or 'healthy' practices such as counting calories? What's detrimental about that behaviour?

The behaviour may not be a problem, but its effects may be. Two people could have the same behaviour but only one gets depressed because of it. Addiction narrows down a person's interests. Loved ones get ignored, hobbies are forgotten. It's a strong indicator if someone needs to repeat behaviour more often for the same satisfaction.

Q Can understanding ourselves help?

You can kick an addiction but still not be fully recovered. Someone may not drink any more, but the emotions

might still be there. Understanding helps us find strategies to avoid a relapse. Addiction can develop as a distraction from emotion, but people don't always know which emotion. In therapy, they can learn to separate emotions and uncover links between past experiences and behaviour.

Q What's the best first step when it comes to tackling addiction?

The first step is admitting that there is a problem. Often, people don't truly think they are an addict and they may return to harmful behaviour. When someone realises they have an addiction, there is a definite shift in the path they are on. *midlandshypnotherapy.com; '15 Minutes To Happiness' (Bonnie Books, £8.99)*



THE UKCP TALKING THERAPIES PODCAST

How to deal with addiction

Listen to Sarah Niblock talk to Richard Nicholls about addiction at psychologies.co.uk/understanding-addiction-podcast-ukcp

About the UKCP and how to find a therapist

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• **To find the right therapist**, log on to psychologies.co.uk/find-a-therapist and look at our Life Labs Channel of experts who may be able to help, or visit psychotherapy.org.uk/find-a-therapist to locate a therapist near you.

