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Opinion #22

What the newspapers won't tell you!

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Chances Are...

You're an Addict!

Meth, crack and booze aren't the only drugs.

You think you're sober? Think again. Trying going without television for a week.

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Regardless of their drug of choice, addicts lead stunted lives. The substance that once brought pleasure eventually becomes a curse, sucking up their resources while giving less and less satisfaction. Trying to quit brings waves of anxiety. Paychecks are blown to support the habit, while children and relationships are neglected. Over time, the addict's health and quality of life deteriorate, and no matter how much of the drug they take, they can never recapture their original high.

That's the trouble with being a NASCAR fan, a soap opera watcher or an NPR listener. The addiction takes you over and pushes real life to the side.

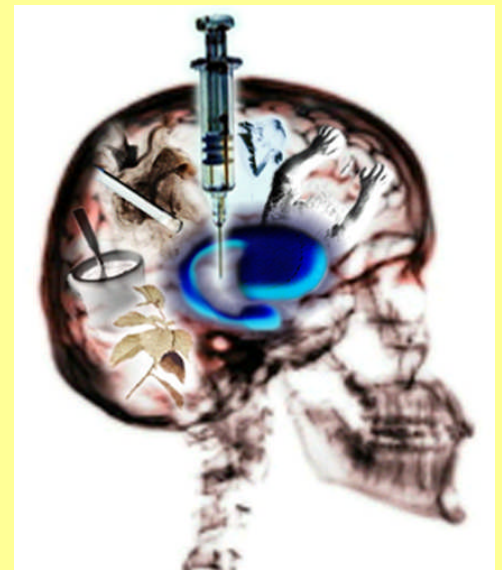
Cocaine, methamphetamine, television and music—it's all the same addiction. The damage varies with the drug, but the underlying mechanism is similar. A distilled substance acts

directly on the emotional centers of the brain, generating good feelings without any external justification. Drugs short-circuit our brain's emotional reward system, giving us the primal sensations we crave without the need for any real accomplishment.

Addiction isn't limited to chemicals. You can be addicted to gambling, promiscuous sex, pornography, over-eating, video games or impulsive shopping. The fact that these things are legal and don't involve sticking a needle in your arm doesn't make them any less damaging. These ritualized activities give us the illusion of happiness, not real happiness. They stimulate the brain while diverting us from real pursuits.

Here's the punch line: most of the leisure activities that society promotes as "normal" are in fact mindless addictions in disguise.

Take music. It's cocaine for the ears. All those people you see in public places with earphones in their ears and iPods in their pockets: addicts. They're playing the same songs over and over, directly stimulating the brain, giving it the illusion that it is doing something



when it is accomplishing nothing at all.

Television is probably the most costly addiction, draining more waking hours than any other. For most people in our society, TV has become a substitute for real goals and activities. "I can quit anytime," the addict says, and indeed he can. It's staying sober that's the problem. How can you resist when the wide-screen with 100+ channels is staring you in the face?

These are harmless addictions, you

may say, but are they? Every hour spent in front of the tube is not spent on any productive activity. Dramas play out before your eyes, but they aren't real, and they stand in the way of honest experience and genuine good works.

Spectator sports are an addiction. Whether or not your team wins the big game has absolutely no bearing on anything. You could be learning something or fighting for a worthy cause, but instead you're fixated on the same repetitive, ritualized activity you've watched a hundred times before.

Movies, books and songs can certainly be meaningful, but what happens when you play the same song over and over? It stops being satisfying. Soon, you are no longer listening because it brings you pleasure but because of the nameless anxiety you feel whenever you turn the music off.

The human brain evolved in a simpler time when requirements for survival were different. Sugar and fat, for example, were once rare and valuable, so the brain was programmed with a taste for them. Today, sugar and fat are plentiful and are available as packaged snacks. These can now be injected directly into the mouth, giving a person the illusion of eating.

What happens when bonbons and french fries become ones primary diet? They lose their perceived flavor, but this doesn't stop people from consuming them. When you are surrounded all the time by the perfect neurological temptation, it is difficult to resist. Given unlimited access to attractive food, most people continue to eat even when they aren't hungry and get little pleasure from it. Food becomes another self-reinforcing addiction.

Not only are these addictions legal; they are actively promoted by commercial interests. Our modern economy depends on excessive consumption—on selling you things you don't need. The sales pitch usually involves duping the brain into choosing sensation over substance.

The main problem of our society is not lack of resources but too much stimulation, outstripping our processing capacity. A good movie once a month may be meaningful. A movie every

night is sick. An hour of TV a day will pretty much wipe out all independent and creative thoughts and render you a functional zombie.

If you go into any dysfunctional home where illegal drugs are used, where children are abused and neglected and where there's no food in the kitchen but empty calories, you will probably also find the television turned on continuously, from morning 'til night. It is part of the addictive lifestyle. If you turn off their TV, you may get almost as strong a withdrawal reaction as taking away their drugs.

Television distills the dramas of life into a shallow but concentrated product that addicts absorb passively through the ears and eyeballs. Simplistic human conflicts are passed through the brain, then neatly resolved by the end of the hour. Useless, sugary products are promoted between acts. Through manipulation of electrons and neurons, the television watcher achieves the illusion of living without ever leaving the couch.

As much as the brain may be fooled, pseudo-living is not the same as real living. The media fix lasts only as long as the media channel is turned on. As soon as you disengage from the screen, you're back to depression and withdrawal. You may become further depressed when you realize how much time has been lost.

Overstimulation is a major disease of modern life. For most people, every free moment is programmed with whatever vapid diversions they can afford. If you go skiing every weekend, are you accomplishing anything or just feeding an addiction? If you run a marathon and win, have you gained anything or merely wasted too much of your life on the track? Addictions can take many forms. What they all have in common is their ultimate meaninglessness.

Overstimulation leads to pathological passivity. You are processing so much data that you don't have time to form meaningful opinions or take preemptive action on any non-urgent issue. Little problems are swept under the carpet until they become big problems.

What happens when you dedicate

your life to music or TV or skiing or sports? It's like dedicating your life to cocaine: your life stops going anywhere. Instead of engaging in real conversations with real people solving real problems, you are drawn into a weak substitute: fake conversations with no one solving nothing.

Is it possible to live without addiction? Yes, but it isn't easy at first. You can start by unplugging whatever media device you are currently hooked into. Give away the TV and throw away the iPod! Turn off the computer, at least until you have it under control. You should also be wary of books and newspapers. Just because the channel is printed or "educational" doesn't make it harmless.

WARNING: This action may be followed by painful withdrawal symptoms, including anxiety, emptiness and depression. "What do I do now?" you ask yourself, looking around desperately for a fix.

The solution is easier than it seems. You look at your life anew and ask, "What are my problems, and how do I solve them?" What are the problems of your family, your neighborhood and humanity at large? What should you explore and teach yourself? These are things that you ignored while in your stupor, but once you are drug-free, you will begin to see them again.

"Real life" consists of working to address the practical problems of the world around you, as opposed to the pseudo problems of imaginary characters.

A few days after you have gone Cold Turkey, the world will begin to brighten up. You will start seeing things in more colors than you have ever known before. You will detect nuances in your environment that you hadn't noticed before, and you will begin to find subtle and creative solutions to your own problems. Freed from the cloud of addiction, you will begin to live life more honestly and fully.

Life, you will find, is much richer and more satisfying when you are an active and focused participant rather than a passive and distracted watcher.

—GC