

# Unraveled *roots*

## Chapter 3: The Root of Addiction

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**Unraveled Roots: Exposing the Hidden Causes of Damaging Behaviors**

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## Chapter Three

# The Root of Addiction

Few living things are more exposed to the elements than trees. Out in the open, they experience a fierce combination of wind, rain, sleet, snow, and blazing heat. Yet despite it all, mature trees stand strong due to their natural ability to adapt. Harsh conditions actually cause them to grow even stronger.

People, on the other hand, have more difficulty weathering the unpredictable, constantly changing seasons of life. We don't automatically know our strength, value, and



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purpose in life. It takes time, loving guidance, and experience for us to know who we are and how to handle challenging people and changing circumstances. From the time we're born, we look to our parents to answer some important questions for us: *Am I valuable? How do I respond when life gets stressful? How do I form friendships and relationships?*

Parents who struggle with substance or behavior addictions model unhealthy and damaging ways for their children to feel good about themselves, cope with disappointments, and build relationships. They reach for drugs, sex, food, or other things to make them feel happy, loved, in control—or at least to numb their pain. The result is that their method(s) of escaping pain, inflicted pain on *you*. It left you exposed to life's difficulties without healthy tools to help you learn, adapt, and grow stronger from them. As a result, you may have also adopted addictive behaviors.

# The storm inside

No one ever sets out to become an addict. Your parent(s) may have begun to use certain substances or behaviors because they craved a temporary, pleasurable feeling, to escape from reality, or to soothe unpleasant emotions. Some can engage in these activities without ever becoming addicted. However, because of a variety of factors, other people are more vulnerable to becoming increasingly dependent on certain behaviors in order to cope and function.

Substance use disorder actually changes the brain’s wiring over time. It causes intense cravings and makes it hard to stop using the substance. The more a person uses, the more he or she builds up a tolerance. He or she needs more and more of it to feel the same effects.<sup>1</sup>

## Substances people can become addicted to include the following:<sup>2</sup>

- Alcohol
- Marijuana
- PCP, LSD and other hallucinogens
- Inhalants
- Opioid pain killers
- Sedatives, hypnotics and medications for anxiety
- Cocaine
- Methamphetamine
- Tobacco

People can also become addicted to behaviors, such as gambling or sex. These follow the same pattern as substance addictions and can have many of the same effects, including negative impacts on work, school and relationships and an increasing dependence despite the personal, mental, or physical harm it is inflicting.<sup>3</sup> Although only gambling disorder is officially recognized as a behavioral addiction by the DSM-5 (the leading diagnostic guide for mental health professionals), **many healthcare providers believe a variety of behaviors can also become addictions. These include:**<sup>4</sup>

- Shopping
- Pornography
- Video Games
- Internet
- Gambling
- Food
- Sex
- Exercise

The list of substances and behaviors that a person can become addicted to is endless. However, we are going to briefly explore three that we often see in the women we counsel and how your exposure to them as a child may still be affecting you today:

## *Substances*

Substance abuse can manifest itself in a variety of ways—through alcohol, illegal substances, prescription drugs, or using legal substances improperly.<sup>5</sup> Some substance abusers are able to hide their addiction. They hold jobs, pay the bills, and interact reasonably well with the outside world. If that was the case in your home, you probably couldn't put it into words as a child, but you sensed something wasn't right. A lack of stability and trust tainted the relationship. You may have known you were loved, but you didn't feel loved. You may not have felt important to your parent(s). No one may have ever talked about it.<sup>6</sup> When you did try to ask questions, you may have been dismissed or made to feel like your feelings were unreasonable, disloyal, or misplaced. You may have been told that what you were experiencing (seeing, feeling, sensing) wasn't true. It may have been too hurtful to your sober parent for you to talk about the addicted parent. So you may begin to believe you can't trust that voice inside of you—the one that's telling you what's right or wrong.

Even if the problem was too obvious to deny, you may have been told not to tell, leaving you with no place to process your pain and emotions. Maybe it was a sibling or other close family member who was abusing substances—and not your parent(s). Still, your parents may have poured much of their energy and attention into that relative, leaving you feeling unimportant or without needed guidance, recognition, and support.

Substance abuse by a parent increases your risk for abusing substances.<sup>7</sup> Other effects of growing up with a parent who abused substances might be less visible or easy to connect to your past, including depression, anxiety, “numbing out” to emotional pain, acting out sexually, difficulty trusting

others, staying engaged, and receiving and internalizing love and care from others.<sup>8</sup>

## Sex

Sex was designed to be pleasurable. However, like any good thing, sex can be distorted and misused. Compulsive sexual behaviors can present in a variety of forms and degrees of severity, but can include compulsive masturbation, excessive use of pornography and repeated engagement in extramarital affairs.<sup>9</sup> In our experience, this could also include high-risk behaviors, such as numerous sexual partners or group sex.

Access to pornography has dramatically increased in the last 20 years with the growing use of the Internet. This means that it is more accessible to people than ever before. Early exposure to sexual content in the media may profoundly impact a child's values, attitudes, and behaviors toward sex and relationships.<sup>10</sup>

Healthy, intimate relationships are not just about sex. They also involve our thoughts and emotions. Healthy relationships are difficult at times, but they're built on respect for each other; partners are open and honest with one another without being cruel. The struggles and sacrifices help both partners to grow and bond in positive ways.

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Pornography, on the other hand, is fantasy. Pornography is “the depiction of erotic behavior (as in pictures or writing) intended to cause sexual excitement.” No real-life relationship can live up to it because it isn't real. It's not about getting

to know or value the other person. It is purely about filling that person's immediate craving without commitment. Pornography makes the person an “object.” The other person feels they can never please their spouse or partner because they can't live up to the idealized, perfect, airbrushed images on the Internet.

When children are exposed to pornographic images and sexual activities while their emotions, brains, and views of sex are still developing, they can become confused. That confusion about healthy sexual relationships can make a child more vulnerable. Other potential effects include depression, social anxiety, pre-mature sexual interactions with peers, self-harm, suicidal thoughts, or attempts, and other high-risk behaviors.<sup>11</sup>



Infidelity, whether it's with one other person or many, can shatter a child's confidence in their parents.

Addiction to sexual activities can flow from an insatiable desire for excitement or the “forbidden fruit”—the person or activity you “can't” have. Infidelity, whether it's with one other person or many, can shatter a child's confidence in their parents. A child may have assumed there was honesty between mom and dad that did not exist. When infidelity between them is exposed, the child may begin to ask themselves, *If my parents weren't honest with each other, how can I know they are being honest with me?* A child may begin to doubt if they can really trust the foundation of their relationships: *I thought my parents' relationship was real, but look what happened. I was wrong. What and who can I trust?*<sup>12</sup>

If your parent was a sex addict or you were exposed to sexual behaviors as a child, you may have developed a cynical view of marriage and relationships. You may believe that honesty and long-term commitment isn't possible, normal, desirable, or to be expected. Although you desire a healthy, long-term relationship, you may have no idea what that looks like or how to pursue one.

## Food

One of the most basic needs we have as humans is food. While food is required to survive and was intended to provide pleasure, for some it becomes an unhealthy way to seek comfort or gain control in their lives.

Although many experts distinguish food addiction from eating disorders, such as anorexia, bulimia, or binge eating disorder,<sup>14</sup> the common thread is that parents who engage in compulsive food behaviors, such as overeating, food deprivation, or bingeing and purging, hand down an unhealthy view and model of eating to their children. Their example may have taught you that these food behaviors are an acceptable method of coping with disappointments and seeking comfort or control.

The damage can be done through the example the parent sets by their compulsive or unhealthy behaviors in regard to their own wellbeing. He or she may have also placed an overemphasis on controlling *your* food intake and weight as well, either subtly or overtly implying your appearance is not acceptable and doesn't measure up to their or society's standards. Or, the pressure you felt might not have been from your parents, but from the world's often unrealistic standards and harsh, cruel assessments of beauty and weight.

## **Why am I an addict?**

Clearly, being exposed to addiction as a child can affect us in profound ways, including becoming an addict ourselves. But maybe you're thinking, *Addiction wasn't present in my home. Why am I struggling with it?* You don't have to have a parent with an addiction to be vulnerable to addiction yourself.

As we discussed in previous chapters, other childhood roots, such as abuse or abandonment, can also leave you feeling insecure, lonely, and worthless. You didn't receive the security, value, and love you needed as a child, so you became vulnerable to grasping at different, often damaging, ways to fill those empty, hurting places. You began to try to fill your need for love or control wherever you could find it. Then one day, you realized you're an addict: a slave to the very substances or behaviors that you believed would bring you love, value, and happiness.

*Keep Growing!*

## A seed of encouragement

Emotions may overwhelm you at times throughout this process. You may have abused drugs, alcohol, and engaged in dysfunctional relationships to numb your pain. As you begin to make better choices and distance yourself from these unhealthy ways of coping, you may begin to feel the impact of traumatic memories and emotions that you've numbed for months, years, or decades. It will make you want to give up. *Don't do it.* You will grow and find freedom through the pain that comes with healing. Your life can be different. How do I know? Because I've grown as I've pushed through the pain, time and time again, and increasingly experienced freedom. Because my life *is* different.

I coped with the pain of my past by numbing it through drugs and alcohol. I tried to satisfy my deeply felt need to be loved through sex with men who didn't truly care about me. Eventually, I decided getting married was the answer. A marriage based on all the wrong things and for all the wrong reasons is never a good idea. As our relationship simultaneously exploded and imploded and my addictions raged, I realized I simply couldn't live this way anymore. I wanted to live a different life, but I didn't know how. Still, I knew I was facing either prison or death if I continued on this path. So I made the choice to get clean. Recovering from drugs and alcohol was really hard. I just had to white-knuckle it through one emotional episode at a time. I can remember the first really tough time I had. I was in inpatient recovery and everything in me wanted to leave. I was like a caged animal, pacing back and forth. A war was raging inside me. I knew if I left I would use again. Part of me wanted that. A bigger part of me did not. I stayed: Victory #1.

I can remember another time that was incredibly hard. Someone suggested that I take a look into codependency to see if it was something that might be contributing to my struggles. I simply read the definition of "codependency" and literally cried for days. It was so confronting, so *me*. I thought I might be the first person to ever die from crying too much. Working through my



codependency was one of the best things I've ever done—grueling, but worth every tear.

Each episode in the recovery process gets a little easier. I promise. The times when you are grieving and in pain get shorter and further apart. As you seek appropriate help and support\* and begin the process of healing from your own past behaviors and choices, you can begin to see more clearly the pain you may have caused others. You'll start to take responsibility and make amends for your actions when appropriate. You aren't the person you used to be. You've drawn a line in the sand and said, "No more." You don't have to be ashamed of what was, because you can be very proud of who you are becoming.

—Karin Barbito

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