



"Inclusivity, generosity, acceptance and non-judgment characterize Scott Gallagher's approach to the healing of addiction. One does not have to agree with everything he states or advocates—indeed, he makes no demand that we do!—to recognize the value of his method, which is to empower addicted human beings, no matter what age, with the choice and possibility of transforming negative compulsions into positive commitments."

Gabor Maté M.D., Author, *In The Realm of Hungry Ghosts: Close Encounters With Addiction*

"In a field where many are rehashing old ideas with little innovation, Scott Gallagher is encouraging us, with an unusual passion, to grow in our understanding and awareness of what motivates us to engage in unwanted behaviors or habits. He does so in a manner that empowers people and guides them to changing behaviors they never believed they could."

Dr. Lee Jampolsky, author of *Healing the Addictive Personality*"

An Interpretation of the Meaning of Addiction

Some authorities say we've become a society full of compulsive thinking and behavior. From our "gotta get it, gotta have it" advertising to our obsessive focus on celebrities, our 'need' to phone, text, surf or watch videos *while driving* to our hunger for more food, energy, sex, entertainment or shopping – i.e. anything that will give us instant gratification, make us feel better, or escape pain or discomfort – many of us are caught up in activities that we are having trouble controlling.

These addictive or compulsive behaviors – or whatever you want to call them - are happening all over – in our schools, our workplaces, our homes, families and the media. And those who have responsibility for dealing with such issues – like parents, teachers, managers, doctors or counselors – are all having difficulty knowing what to do.

So which ones are actually addictions, and which are just bad habits? And does it matter? How much control or choice do we really have over our behaviors? And even when we feel "powerless," is there something we can still do to "recover", change or develop healthier habits? Those are just some of the questions I'll be exploring in the pages ahead.

There IS a *Lot* of Confusion

When we talk about "addictions," we enter a world of great confusion. Why? Because even experts can't agree on what that word actually means.

Recently, I took an addictions course at a local college. (My skills in this field come out of my own experiences, decades of reading/self study, and working directly with addicts and people with destructive habits. So I thought it was about time to get a little "formal training" in the field.) In the first chapter of the text book for my first class, called "Addiction Intervention Strategies," it says, "...the terms

“addictive” and “addiction,” and the related term “alcoholism,” will generally be avoided, because they have no agreed definitions...”

And that somehow did not surprise me...because in my reading over many years, I have seen exactly the same thing. From everyday people, self-confessed addicts, authorities and experts to PhDs and medical doctors, everyone seems to have a different perspective. Some see it as a disease. Others see it as a brain issue. Some say it's a choice, while others say it's not. There are many who say we're powerless, and many others who say we're not. Some experts suggest it is caused by abuse and neglect, others say its genetics and other biological factors, still others say it is caused by conditioning and other social-environmental factors.

If anything, it can leave one feeling a bit helpless – to know what's right, who to believe, or what to do!

That's why I'll be describing some of these different perspectives and views. What you'll discover, as I did, is that there isn't just “one truth” about addictions. There are many. What's more, the line between addictions and habits is not as black and white as one would think. Many experts see it more like a continuum, a spectrum. And these insights give us the opportunity to make more choices and conclusions for ourselves. There isn't just one way of dealing with our addictions; once again, there are many.

What the Experts Have to Say

There are so many different views on what “addictions” are and what causes them that I decided to present some of the major ones here, so you can consider them for yourself. I also wanted to use (as much as possible) the actual words of the doctors, PhDs, researchers and other experts who've written about them, so you'll be able to see it through their eyes and experience – and then come to your own conclusions about what makes the most sense to you.

Addiction is a Disease or Illness

One of the most prevalent ‘schools of thought’ about addiction in our society is that it is a mental, physical, or even spiritual illness or disease. Perhaps you’ve come to see it that way, or heard about it from others.

This perspective appears to go back to the 1930’s, the founding of the AA movement, and the work of Dr. William D. Silkworth, then-Medical Director at one of the oldest hospitals in the U.S. treating alcohol and drug addiction. A pioneer in the field, Dr. Silkworth was invited by the founders of AA to share in writing his ideas about the causes and treatments of alcoholism – which they would then publish in their upcoming book called *Alcoholics Anonymous*.

“I do not... believe that alcoholism is entirely a problem of mental control,” Dr. Silkworth wrote. And in explaining more about what happens with chronic alcoholics, he said “We believe that the action of alcohol on [them] is a manifestation of an allergy.”

The authors of the “Big Book” (as those in AA often refer to it) then go on to say, “The doctor’s theory that we have an allergy to alcohol interests us.” Later in the book they write, “we have come to believe [that alcoholism is] an illness.”..an “illness which only a spiritual experience will conquer.” And thus the idea that addiction is an illness is at the core of the AA and 12 step movements.

Until the founding of Alcoholics Anonymous, many people suffering from alcoholism and drug addiction were essentially considered immoral, weak-willed, hopeless or untreatable. However, because of its remarkable success in helping alcoholics, AA, its 12-step program, fellowships and meetings, became the leading form of “treatment” used or recommended by treatment centers and hospitals. Its spiritual principles and approach were also adapted to treat a wide range of

other addictions as well, such as narcotics (NA-Narcotics Anonymous), cocaine (CA-Cocaine Anonymous), food issues (OA-Overeaters Anonymous), spending (SA-Spenders Anonymous) and many others including an organization I founded called [All Addictions Anonymous](#). Today it is the most frequently used approach for dealing with addictions of all kinds. (And, although I am no longer active in the 12 step community, having been through it myself, I am profoundly grateful for it.)

It's interesting to note that in 1960, Bill W., the co-founder of AA, clarified the AA movement's use of the terms disease and illness. "We have never called alcoholism a disease," he said, "because, technically speaking, it is not a disease entity...Therefore we did not wish to get in wrong with the medical profession by pronouncing alcoholism a disease entity. Therefore we always called it an illness, or a malady – a far safer term for us to use."

The illness or disease perspective on addictions has become commonplace, both within our medical system and societal thinking. For example, Dr. Alan Leshner, MD and former head of the National Institute on Drug Abuse at the U.S. National Institutes of Health, wrote an article called "Addiction is a Brain Disease" that "addiction should be understood as a chronic recurring illness that requires treatment." Similarly, Wilkie A. Wilson and Cynthia M. Kuhn, both Ph.D. neuropharmacologists and professors at Duke University Medical Center have written this about addictions:

"People have been using addictive substances for centuries, but only very recently... have scientists begun to understand in detail how the brain becomes addicted.

People often claim to be addicted to chocolate, coffee, football, or some other substance or behavior that brings pleasure. This is not likely. Addiction is an overwhelming compulsion, based [on an] alteration of brain circuits that normally regulate our ability to guide our actions to achieve goals. ...calling our love of

chocolate or football an “addiction” not only trivializes the devastation wrought by addiction, but misses the point that addiction involves a hijacking of the brain’s circuitry...”

While we’re talking about Wilson and Kuhn, it’s also useful to consider how they describe what happens with an addiction.

“[Addiction] overrides our ordinary, unaffected judgment. [It] leads to the continued use of a substance or continuation of a behavior despite extremely negative consequences. An addict will choose the drug or behavior over family, the normal activities of life, employment, and at times even basic survival. There are probably large numbers of people, with many different kinds of behaviors, who can identify with that description – even though some may not be “medically” recognized to have addictions.”

The authors also say: “No matter how much you like some drug or activity and how much you choose to involve yourself with it, you are not addicted if you can stop it when the consequences become negative for you.”

So do experts and authorities agree that addiction is an illness or brain disease? One would certainly think so, based on how it is frequently talked about in medical and treatment circles. However, not everyone sees it the same way. In fact, far from it.

In its “Fundamentals of Addictions,” the highly-regarded Center for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) in Toronto agrees in part, but not entirely. They write: “Many clinicians and researchers prefer to use the term ‘dependence,’ as defined by the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fourth Edition* (DSM-IV)” – a book considered to be the ‘gold standard’ in the medical community – “as it is more precise than ‘addiction.’ Drug dependence, in the

DSM's terms, indicates the existence of a brain disease and is distinct from drug abuse, which may only indicate bad judgment."

In reading the CAMH description, you may have noticed that the words "bad judgment." This language suggests that we have some 'choice' in the matter – and opens the door to the many other perspectives about our addicted behaviors and tendencies among those who work and write in this field.

Addiction is Not a Disease/Illness

Stanton Peele, Ph.D., J.D. has been investigating and writing about addiction since 1969. A licensed psychologist, legal attorney, and practicing psychotherapist, he is the author of nine books and over 200 professional articles about alcoholism, addiction and addiction treatment.

In his first book, *Love and Addiction*, Peele began to revolutionize thinking on the subject by saying that "addiction is not limited to narcotics, or to drugs at all... Addiction is a pattern of behavior and experience which is best understood by examining an individual's relationship with his/her world." Addiction, he says, is "a general pattern of behavior that nearly everyone experiences in varying degrees at one time or another... It is not essentially a medical problem, but a problem of life."

Peele goes on to say that addiction is "frequently encountered and very often overcome in people's lives - the failure to overcome addictions is the exception. It occurs for people who learn drug use or other destructive patterns as a way of gaining satisfaction in the absence of more functional ways of dealing with the world."

"Addiction is a way of coping with life, of artificially attaining feelings and rewards people feel they cannot achieve in any other way. As such, it is no more a

treatable medical problem than is unemployment, lack of coping skills, or degraded communities and despairing lives. The only remedy for addiction is for more people to have the resources, values and environments necessary for living productive lives.”

“People are addicted when they pursue a sensation or activity relentlessly and sacrifice other life alternatives to this pursuit, and when they cannot face existence without this one involvement. We know people are addicted by their behavior and experience: nothing else defines addiction.”

In another one of his books, *7 Tools to Beat Addiction*, Peele says: “Believing that alcoholism is a disease, that no one escapes the grips of heroin or cigarettes, that withdrawal from either is too horrible to resist, or that you are born to be addicted imbues your addiction with power and irresistibility that it does not need to have. The more you believe any or all of these myths, the more likely you are to remain addicted.”

Are we ALL Addicted?

If addictions are more than just a disease or an illness that affects a relative few – but are a way of coping with life and seeking better feelings – that suggests that many of us would have them. And that perspective IS widely shared. For example, Dr. Gabor Mate, a medical doctor who works with addicts in Vancouver’s “downtown Eastside” (one of Canada’s most drug-affected urban areas) writes:

“Addiction cuts large swaths across our culture. Many of us are burdened with compulsive behaviors that harm us and others, behaviors whose toxicity we fail to acknowledge or feel powerless to stop. Many people are addicted to accumulating wealth; for others the compulsive pull is power. Men and women become addicted to consumerism, status, shopping or fetishized relationships, not to mention the obvious and widespread addictions such as gambling, sex, junk food

and the cult of the “young” body image.”

Dr. David B. Hawkins, clinical psychologist, therapist and counselor for over 30 years, believes that we are actually an addicted society and that socially-acceptable behaviors, such as working, eating, shopping and exercising, can take over and control our lives. He calls them “everyday addictions.”

“[W]e have found the addict and the addict is us. You and me. Our mothers, fathers, sisters and brothers. Our best friends and our worst enemies. Everyday addictions are commonplace, testing the rich and famous as well as the middle-class suburbanites. ...We’re a mishmash of cocaine addicts, cell phone addicts, food addicts, and gambling addicts. We overspend, overwork, shop too much, and become entangled in sexual [issues]. We’re addicted to innumerable drugs and activities that create a wide range of everyday addicts.

...Even worse, our culture, society, and perhaps even our churches enable our addictions. Refusal to talk about these addictive behaviors reinforces them. We’re a parade of addicts, and the extent that we admit that and talk about it is the extent to which we face the truth leading to freedom. Few are exempt from slipping into some form of addictive behavior, and fewer still are willing to face the full extent of their addiction.”

In their book, *Willpower’s Not Enough*, Arnold Washton, PhD, and Donna Boundy, MSW look at it similarly, but from a more societal perspective

“It is now widely known that children growing up with chemically-dependent parents are at high risk for developing addictions themselves. But what we are just starting to realize is that growing up in an addictive society affect us all too – in many of the same ways.

In fact, it may be all but impossible to grow up in our present culture and not acquire at least some vulnerability to addiction. That’s because the addictive

personality traits (an emphasis on image, cravings for power and control, denial, dishonesty, just to name a few) are increasingly reflected in society's values and trends. And it's a self-perpetuating process. Certain trends create the conditions in which addiction thrives, and growing numbers of addictive people reinforce these trends.

Our society, in a sense, is becoming a large dysfunctional family. And just as children in dysfunctional families become prone to addiction as they try to adapt to their troubled family, so too are we becoming more addiction-prone as we try to adapt to the larger dysfunctional system in which we live."

So What's Underneath It All?

As we've seen above, there's a widely held belief that most – if not all – of us are likely to become "addicted" in some way. Some say it's because of the society we grow up in. Others, like Lee Jampolsky, PhD, say "there is an addictive personality in each and every one of us. It is part of being human." In his book, *Healing the Addictive Personality*, Jampolsky writes:

"The Addictive Personality dictates situations either as "to be avoided because it is painful" or "to be embraced because it makes you feel better." What it does not want you to know is there is nothing about a specific ailment or situation in itself that causes us to experience emotional upset, and that running from the perceived pain is actually the source of the suffering.

It could even be said that another definition of addiction is continuing to run from perceived situations by ways that temporarily make us feel better, despite an increase in our suffering. In the end, the things we do to make us feel better (drugs, alcohol, shopping, eating, relationships, work, gambling) are what cause our suffering."

Chris Prentiss, in a book called *The Alcoholism and Addiction Cure*, goes deeper into what he believes is driving our addictive behaviors: “Most of us are constantly modifying our moods and physical sensations [with] substances and behavior patterns. We wake up and feel a little foggy or groggy or slow, and we reach for a coffee. At the end of a meal, if we feel a little unsatisfied, we may have a sweet dessert. If we feel a bit out of sorts, we might go shopping. What’s the goal of all those behavioral patterns? We’re striving to achieve balance. ...[But it] is when we use alcohol, addictive drugs, or addictive behavior to modify [our] feelings, rather than addressing the cause of the imbalance, that we become dependent.”

World-renowned author John Bradshaw – voted by his peers as “one of the most influential writers on emotional health in the 20th Century” – suggests that our inability to face and deal with our emotional pain is causing us to become addicted. In his pioneering book *Bradshaw On: The Family*, he says: “Addiction has become our national lifestyle (or rather death style). It is a death style based on the relinquishment of the self as a worthwhile being to a self who must achieve and perform or use something outside of itself in order to be lovable and happy. Addictions are pain-killing substitutes for legitimate suffering. To legitimately suffer we have to feel as bad as we feel.”

In *Willpower’s Not Enough*, Washton and Boundy agree. “Addictive thinking is increasingly common in today’s society and in our families,” they write. At the core of such thinking lies the belief that “life should be without pain and require no effort.” They add, “If we insist on avoiding emotional pain, on being comfortable all the time, we will *have* to seek ways to avoid reality, to escape our mood.” They then go on to describe some of the thinking patterns that are driving this “addictive thinking” and our lack of acceptance of who we are:

“Part of having an addictive “dis-ease” means that we hold certain contradictory beliefs that set the stage for inner conflict and struggle – such as believing simultaneously that we are not enough and that we should be perfect.”

“A faulty belief system lies at the root of addiction. This belief system... embraces the idea that it is possible to be perfect, that the world should be limitless, that our image is more important than who we really are, that we are not enough, and that externals (people, drugs, and other things outside of ourselves) hold the “magic” solutions to life’s problems.”

What is Causing the Pain?

Dr. William Glasser, M.D. is an American psychiatrist and the author of more than 25 books. In his book, *Positive Addiction*, Glasser states that most of us want *happiness* more than anything else in our lives. We get that, he says, through **love** and **worth**; that is, by loving and being loved, and doing something we believe is worthwhile. However, when we don’t have these, we experience some degree of misery, pain and failure instead.

In Glasser’s view, when we don’t feel strong enough or able to get what we want, we are driven to make choices that get rid of our pain and feelings of failure. At first we simply *give up* trying to find love and worth, or we make excuses for not having it by saying things like, “Why try? I’d just fail,” “It’s my parents’ fault,” or some other rationalization or justification. If that doesn’t work, we may take what Glasser calls “symptoms” – like depression, anger, rebellion, physical pain or illness.

Finally, as a third step, as those increase in severity we are likely to become addicted – again, as our way of trying to feel better. As painful as all of these are, they are less painful than facing the fact that we have failed and given up on obtaining love and self-worth.

Here's one way that Glasser puts it:

“Typically a negative addict is a person who is severely frustrated in his own particular search for love and worth. He made the first choice to give up usually when he was very young. As a second choice he may have tried acting out for a while but for him it was not very successful and he usually switched to depression or to a psychosomatic symptom. Then he is introduced to alcohol or heroin and suddenly, miraculously, not only is the pain gone but it is replaced by an intense pleasure that he has never before experienced.

...[This] provides him with [a sense of] “glory” where in the past he had only pain, overpowers every other urge within him and he devotes his life to the addicting drug or behavior. To that end he is willing to give up principles, ideals, family, friends, or spouse; nothing in his life is allowed to stand against the drug or the addiction. He lives by one set of values, which is that whatever promotes his addiction is right, everything else is wrong. If the drug is illegal, as is heroin, he will lie, cheat, steal, and on rare occasions kill to get both the relief and the pleasure the drug provides. Even if the drug is legal, as is alcohol, the alcoholic will let little or nothing stand between him and his bottle.”

The reason why addiction is so difficult to break, says Glasser, “is that it alone... consistently... relieves the pain of failure, and provides an intensely pleasurable experience. It could be argued that the intense pleasure came from relieving the pain of failure...”

The obvious problem of addiction is that the addict, through his addiction, is able to live with little love or worth, without having to suffer the pain of failing to get it. In fact, he enjoys his life if his addiction is satisfied, and has no need for anything else. His credo is why search for something as tenuous, in his experience, as love and worth when his addiction is sure.

It is this pain coupled with the pleasure of the drug that locks an addict into his habit...[M]erely depriving an addict of his addiction will neither weaken his habit nor break it.”

What the “Three Stages” Might Look Like

When we look at society as a whole, relatively few of us will end up becoming cocaine, heroin or hard drug addicts. If Glasser’s three-stage theory is correct, however, many of us could well be using other kinds of experiences and behaviors to deal with our lack of inner happiness. So let’s consider them.

First, at the stage-three level, there are all the other kinds of “addictive behaviors” (mentioned earlier) that are showing up in society – from drinking and smoking to over-use of prescription drugs, excessive working and shopping, food consumption and Internet use.

Some authorities label these as compulsions or addictions, while others call them dependencies or ‘bad habits.’ But where’s the line? And does it really matter what we call them, since so many people are having difficulty breaking them?

Next, think of the many problems people face with physical pain, illness, stress, depression, even bullying in schools or aggressive behaviors at work. Are these actually symptoms of Glasser’s stage two? And could they turn into more addictive behaviors, if what’s driving them inside isn’t dealt with?

Lastly, what would stage-one issues look like? If we have given up on finding love, worth and happiness in “positive” ways, what behaviors and habits might we engage in to make ourselves feel better: controlling others, worrying, complaining, blaming, overeating, self-medicating, pornography, Web surfing, engaging in unproductive behaviors at work, becoming couch-potatoes? And

might this be the reason why many former addicts turn to ‘softer’ addictions and habits – like drinking coffee, smoking cigarettes and eating junk food – after their recovery? Perhaps they’re simply shifting from one stage, or form of coping, to another.

Let me reiterate (as I will do often in this book) that this is NOT meant to be a criticism or judgment of any of these behaviors, or those of us who engage in them! As Glasser puts it, they are actually “successful” ways we’ve found to cope with our negative thoughts and feelings.

Looking at our behaviors in this way also opens up several larger questions. For example, “What is the connection between addictions and habits?” and “How much is ‘choice’ involved?” Both are important when it comes to dealing with the many kinds of destructive, disempowering or hard-to-change behaviors we have in our lives. So let’s consider the “habits” question first.

Addictions and Habits: What’s the Connection?

When I was involved in AA and other 12-step programs, I remember some people making a **very** big distinction between “addictions” and “habits.” ‘MY ADDICTION IS NOT A HABIT!’ some would say vehemently. And I think I understand why.

If we believe that alcoholism and other addictions are “the result of an illness” and “that no real alcoholic *ever* recovers control” (both quotes come from the Big Book), it is natural to see addictions and habits as different. First, “habit” implies choice; “addiction” and illness implies no choice. And second, as Wilson and Kuhn said, ‘comparing our love of chocolate or football (or other habits) to addictions “trivializes the devastation wrought by addiction.”’

Having personally experienced the ‘ravages’ of various addictions, and having seen what it has done to so many others, I DO NOT want to either trivialize or

compare them to “habits” in severity. I also do not wish to put down the AA/12 step perspective because I personally felt powerless in trying to deal with some of my addictions, used multiple 12 step communities for my own “recoveries”; and also taught it to hundreds of others. Heck, this book would never have been written had I not experienced the 12 steps!

That said, many, many experts in the field – from the CAMH reference earlier (about disease and bad judgment) to many others quoted here who see addiction as a way of coping with the pain and challenges of life – suggest that there IS a connection between our addictions and our habits.

In their article “How Addiction Hijacks Our Reward System,” neuropharmacologists Wilson and Kuhn put it this way:

“Are habits addictions? This is a tough question, because such habits range from mild and innocuous – such as twirling your hair when you are thinking about something – to dangerous, for example, overeating and gambling. Mild habits can be difficult to stop, but if we can stop when we must, we are not addicted. More dangerous habits or compulsions may be different. In fact... modern neurobiology suggests that there are some strong similarities between drug addictions and compulsive habits.”

So where do habits end and addictions begin? No one can say for sure.

Nationally recognized expert Dr. Marc F. Kern has over 30 years of experience as a clinical psychologist and addictions specialist. Kern, who has also wrestled with his own addictions, treats patients who have “self-sabotaging problem habits with alcohol, street drugs, prescription drugs, smoking, gambling, pornography, over-eating, and other excessive behaviors.” Here’s how he describes it:

“What do habits have to do with addictions? We are all creatures of habit. Forming habits is normal and necessary. Some habits help us to be more productive. Being on time, brushing our teeth, exercising regularly are all habits that improve our lives. But some habits have the opposite effect. We call these out-of-control, unhealthy habits by another name. We call them addictions.

Despite the conventional wisdom, addiction is never simply a matter of having a disease. Nor is it simply a choice. In most cases, addictive behavior is really a complicated interaction of psychology, social environment, and individual biology. Smoking, excessive drinking, gambling compulsively, and even overeating are habitual patterns of behavior that can be modified – with the right approach.

Habits and addictions are part of a continuum. Even addictions themselves range from mild to extreme. But traditional addiction treatments take a black and white, either/or position. The thinking is that if addiction is a disease (and if there is no real medical treatment), the best we can do is learn to live with the biological malady. You are powerless over it and the best you can do is hold onto the hope that it doesn't unexpectedly reappear and ruin your life. If it is a habit, then we think that we should be able to stop it through force of will. And if choosing to stop doesn't work, then the false conclusion is that either we are morally defective, weak-willed, or we must be biologically doomed for our lifetime.”

It's interesting to note that, even though Kern was once addicted himself, he then says: “Addictions can be reduced to habits or eliminated completely using modern psychological skill-building techniques. Progress can be made... even while you are involved with substance abuse... Startling as it may seem, some people don't and shouldn't need to stop their habitual behavior 100%!”

Where Does “Choice” Come In?

Almost every authority I’ve ever read – apart from the ones who see addiction strictly as a disease that requires chemical treatment – says that choice at some level (whether conscious or unconscious) shapes our addictions. For some, it’s our choices about the activities we become involved in, the environments we live in, or the people we hang out with. For others, it’s the lifestyles we engage in, the thoughts we choose, or the ways we try to deal with our underlying feelings.

Even the founders of AA, who said that chronic alcoholism (addiction) is a “seemingly hopeless state of mind and body,” believed that we are not ultimately powerless to change. In fact, their program was based on our ability to make certain decisions and choose to practice certain behaviors and ways of thinking (i.e. the 12 steps) that would give alcoholics (and addicts) renewed control over their lives.

If both addictions and habits are our ways of coping with, adjusting to, or finding happiness in life, then at some level choice enters into them. It might be the result of “bad judgment,” as CAMH referred to drug abuse. It could be dealt with by “turning our will over to a higher power” as AA instructs (which is also a choice) or using “modern psychological skill-building techniques” as Marc Kern teaches. It might be turning around our “faulty belief system... [that] it is possible to be perfect” or that “life should be without pain and require no effort,” as Washton and Boundy said; or helping “more people to have the resources, values and environments necessary for living productive lives” as Stanton Peele described it. Each one involves both choice, a new way of thinking and a change in behavior.

Jeffrey Schaler, Ph.D., in his book called *Addiction is a Choice*, says: “As [people] come to believe that addiction has more to do with the environments they live in

than with the drugs they use (a clear indication of research), they may further realize they have the power to change those environments to help themselves.”

It’s useful to think back to what Chris Prentiss wrote earlier in *The Alcoholism and Addiction Cure*, that “most of us are constantly modifying our moods and physical sensations [with] substances and behavior patterns” such as drinking coffee, eating sweets or going shopping. The goal of these choices, he says, is to create an inner “balance.” He then adds: “When our body, mind and spirit are not in alignment, we consciously or subconsciously medicate with food, alcohol, drugs, sex, television, and other diversions to forget or suppress the symptoms of imbalance.”

Finally, I’d like to return to Dr. William Glasser – who developed both “reality therapy” and “choice theory,” and has some controversial views (at least among psychiatrists) on issues like personal choice, personal responsibility and personal transformation.

Glasser believes there are actually two types of addictions: Negative and Positive. Negative addictions, like alcohol or heroin, “always weaken and often destroy us.” These are based (as mentioned above) on a lack of love and feelings of worthlessness, judgment and guilt. Positive addictions, on the other hand – which can include such practices as meditation or running – “strengthen us and make our lives more satisfying.”

“A positive addiction increases your mental strength and is the opposite of a negative addiction, which seems to sap the strength from every part of your life except in the area of the addiction.” Positive addicts, he says, “are almost always stronger,” and “live with more confidence, more creativity, and more happiness, and usually in much better health.”

“The positive addict enjoys his addiction but it does not dominate his life. From it

he gains mental strength which he uses to help himself accomplish whatever he tries to do more successfully. Unlike a negative addict, who is satisfied completely to live for his addiction, to the exclusion of everything else, a positive addict uses his extra strength to gain more love and more worth, more pleasure, more meaning, more zest from life in general. Positive addiction is especially valuable because it is a way in which anyone by himself can increase his strength.”

The key to positive addictions is that it is a choice – an alternative way to find happiness. In fact, Glasser says that “it is possible to become addicted to any physical or mental activity,” if you fulfill certain criteria and achieve a particular state of mind (which he calls the “PA state”) regularly, which he describes in his book. “While the activity itself [like running] may be grueling or boring, it causes a pleasurable mental effect while it goes on, and on after, that makes the whole experience so pleasing it is addicting.”

Positive addictions aren’t as easy as drinking or picking up a cigarette, for instance. Glasser says it can take six months to a year of activity, one hour every day, to develop a strength-giving addiction. The activity must usually be done alone, with no demands, striving for excellence, or self-criticism. But in the experience of millions of joggers, bicycle riders, exercisers, meditators and others, including Glasser, they work.

- My Interpretation of the Meaning of Addiction

Before giving you my interpretation, I want to stress again, that I am not out to convince you that my perspective is “the truth.” It’s just a perception, a viewpoint, like all the others. In fact, you might call this my working interpretation/definition which could change at anytime.

1) There is no single “true” or “right” answer on what addiction means or what causes it. However, everybody’s approach may be worth listening to, has validity, and can potentially help us deal with our “addictions”.

2) I don’t “know” the meaning of addiction, and the most valuable definition is the one that feels right to you. That may sound strange, since we normally look to “the experts” for what’s “right.” From my perspective, the real goal is not to come up with the perfect “Definition” or “Model” of addiction – but to find – OR CREATE - one that supports YOU in dealing with it, in the most effective way. I say “CREATE”, because that is part of what I did. I created [All Addictions Anonymous](#) many years ago because (at the time) there were no communities that were fully in alignment with my personal beliefs and commitment to be FREE of All Addictions.

*For me, an addiction could be **any behavior or habit that has “destructive, hurtful or negative” consequences severe enough that you want to stop or control it to whatever degree you feel you need to in order for these negative consequences to reduce themselves to a level YOU have authentically chosen – and even when you try as hard as you can to accomplish this, you don’t seem to have the [power of choice](#). The “habit” seems to have mastered you.***

This behavior may be giving you a degree of comfort or pleasure right now; you may even “love it” while doing it; but at some level, you’d rather not be doing it, because it disagrees with you at a deep personal level. It’s also causing negative results in your life, physically, mentally or emotionally. And yet you continue to do it, because it seems like you have no control over it, no matter how committed you are. And even if you do stop or reduce it significantly, you then substitute with other bad habits or addictions – and you avoid dealing with what might be driving it.

3) If you have an unwanted behavior and the word “addiction” speaks to you, use it, even if some experts don’t define your behavior that way. And if the word “Addiction” doesn’t resonate for you, pick one that does.

4) There is a connection between what we call “addictions” and what we call “habits.” And by listening to people who have successfully dealt with either of these (or both), we can find common practices and “solutions” that will help us deal with ALL of them.

Is My Definition of Addiction Useful?

That’s all that matters. Is my definition useful for you? It really might not be and I encourage you to honor your “truth”. I really don’t want you to take what I’ve just said as being “The” “Truth” about addiction. If this definition fits for you, great. If not, that’s great too. Personally, here’s why I’ve found it useful:

1) *It helps us decide for ourselves.* This definition applies to *our experience*, rather than a “medical” diagnosis. This isn’t to deny the usefulness of expert opinions. However, since doctors, scientists and authorities in the field don’t agree on an absolute truth, this definition encourages people to look at their own behaviors and experience, and decide for themselves.

2) *It’s inclusive, and not dependent on our history.* This definition applies equally to someone who believes they have a disease and someone who doesn’t. In fact, it applies to whatever someone might see as “the cause,” be it disease, genetics, environment, upbringing, social-economic conditions or something else. Again, each of those has validity. However, my focus is on what people can do in the present – instead of experiencing themselves as victims of the past (including their birth) or powerless to change because of what they observe going on around them.

3) ***It is neither pro nor con the 12 steps.*** Sometimes a person is feeling so much shame or has come to feel so powerless over their “habit,” that being told they have a disease and that it is not their fault, and that there’s a solution through a “higher power” is very helpful. Exactly how and why it works is open to interpretation. But the fact is, for many it does.

However, not everyone believes that addiction is a disease. Some can’t accept the 12-step’s “spiritual/religious” approach. And for others, the belief in powerlessness isn’t useful and can even be debilitating. Some people believe they DO still have control over their habit or addiction. And I think that all these perspectives need to be honored. That’s why I’ve tried to use definitions and solutions that can work for anyone, regardless of their belief system.

4) ***This definition doesn’t separate addictions from habits.*** Since we all engage in behaviors which have negative consequences, this definition simply applies to those things that you feel unable to stop. However, this doesn’t separate them from the rest of your behaviors. And that means you can work with ANY or all of your habits, (including those that we call compulsions and addictions) at the same time.

5) ***It helps to ‘normalize’ addictions and remove some of the stigma.*** As we come to see these ‘patterns of behavior’ in ourselves, it begins to make them more commonplace or acceptable. It helps take some of the shame and guilt out of them. And it also connects us with others instead of separating and dividing us. If everyone has them – i.e. if we’re all doing things that result in different degrees of harm, discomfort or destructiveness – then we don’t have to feel so bad and alone. (This is a core experience of people with socially stigmatized addictions, by the way.) Instead, we can begin to look at these behaviors as simply part of human nature.

Going Beyond “Right and Wrong”

One of the things I’ve learned over the years is that, in the field of addictions, there is a huge emphasis on “[who’s right and who’s wrong](#),” and this causes a lot of conflict, anger and even fighting among us. (Perhaps your experience has been similar.)

So what do we disagree on? Without wanting to be facetious, one could say almost everything. From “addiction is a disease” to addiction isn’t a disease. Some people swear *by* the 12 steps (as the only method of treatment) and just as many who swear *at* them. There are disagreements about how much [choice](#) we have; whether you can deal with several addictions at the same time (part of my reason for starting [All Addictions Anonymous](#)); what substances or behaviors are actually addictions; what the differences between addictions and bad habits are; and even, who is an “addict” at all.

When I was in early “recovery”, I would go to 12 step meetings and judge people as being either moderate drinkers, hard drinkers or “real alcoholics”. I took pride in convincing you I was a “real hardcore” alcoholic/addict, saying things like, “You’re not addicted. Let me tell you about being addicted!” and then share my worst (or best) war stories to convince you of how I was different from you. I was making others right or wrong, and separating my patterns of addiction from those of others – and I hurt many people by doing this. Looking back, I see the way I treated some people as being abusive. I could not see it at the time. I was blinded by my arrogance – thinking my way was the only real right way – and if you did not agree, I judged you as being in denial.

What Actually is an “Addiction?”

The medical ‘bible’ on addictions that I referred to in the last section, called the DSM-IV (*Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, fourth edition), includes only a small number of substances – essentially alcohol, drugs and nicotine – in its list. To be factual, it doesn’t even use the word “addictions” at all, but rather refers to “substance abuse” and “substance dependence.” The next proposed edition (DSM-5) *does* use the term addiction, but the list is still quite small. For example, gambling is the only “behavioral addiction” that will be included; issues like sex and Internet use were considered, but have not yet been accepted. So the medical way of looking at addictions is a slowly developing process.

But what about the large number of other “addiction-like” conditions that people are experiencing? For example, consider eating disorders like anorexia and bulimia. Many people I know believe these are addictions; however, the professional community does not. Instead, it calls them “mental health disorders.” Then there is the “addiction movement” itself, where the term addiction is used for a wide range of issues from overeating to codependency to criminal behavior. In fact, if you do an Internet search on 12-step groups, there are more than 100 different types of fellowships. So who is really “right” about what is “actually an addiction?”

What Does “Our Ability to Stop” Mean?

Another key aspect for determining what is an addiction is our ability or inability to stop – something I’ve also used in my definition. But who can really determine that for certain? And when we say “stop,” do we mean “stay stopped?” This concept gets us into all kinds of debates.

For example, if our brain chemistry shows we are dependent on a drug or behavior, does that mean we are unable to stop using it? Experience shows that that’s not always the case. Or, if we do find a way to stop a behavior, how long do

we need to stay stopped for it to not be considered an addiction? What is the line between “I can’t stop” and “if I had enough motivation, I would stop?” Or when we do discover new ways to stop – as people continually are – does that mean that they (or we) didn’t have an addiction in the first place? Or are they all in denial, headed for relapse because they did not stop in the way we think is “The Right Way.”

I think you can see the difficulties here , and why there’s so much disagreement among those who have been working for years, if not most of their life, to understand addictions, what causes them and how to treat them.

Now I’m not saying that it’s wrong to disagree. We all see things differently, and this process can help us learn from different perspectives. But the problem comes when we focus most of our energy trying to prove our rightness over others. What’s more, communications among us often get quite heated, even abusive. People like Stanton Peele, for example, were attacked when they disagreed with the 12 Step and disease model.

So what’s my point? Well, to put it as gently – yet as bluntly – as I can, our Addiction to “being right” isn’t working. It’s actually hurting us. People who have “addictions” – and people who don’t - are confused about what to do. It’s blocking our willingness to see the value of each other’s perspective. It’s creating conflict, divisions and differences among people working in the same field. It’s creating fear among those who have problems and want help, as a recent email I received showed all too clearly:

In understanding additions, I often see such differing – and heated – discussions online when looking at weight-loss books, or even listening to the media. Some people say that obese people just eat too much; others say there's[sic] psychological or spiritual reasons for weight problems. It

hurts when I've struggled so long, and people, very cruelly and judgmentally, say all I need to do is eat less. – Tracey B.

What I've come to believe is that our conflicts are not only getting in the way of helping people but they might possibly be what is fueling our secondary addictions and stopping us from being fully free. And that's why I've moved away from "who's right and who's wrong" to "we are ALL right," and to begin looking for what we have in common.

Suppose we were to put our paradigms aside for a moment, and looked for what's effective among all approaches? Regardless of how we define addiction or what caused these "unwanted habits" originally, what practices are we using that are actually effective in helping people reduce or prevent them? That's what I'm committed to teaching and learning more about, so as to bring us together in our shared search for what works.

One of my dreams, is to create a residential [Power of Choice Wellness](#) Centre, that embraces, offers, and custom-creates programs that welcome all view-points on "addiction", while teaching - and demonstrating through how our staff treats people in reality - the fundamental principle that no path is superior, and all viewpoints are equally valid.

If that sounds altruistic, maybe it is. But it's not just to be "nice" or kind to each other (though that certainly wouldn't hurt). It's about being willing to see the impact and cost that our conflicts and arguing are having on invalidating people. And it's about finding the common patterns, issues, practices and solutions that can help anyone deal with any, and all, addictive or unwanted behaviors.

What might be Driving Our Addictions?

Many of the “experts” I quoted seem to be pointing to the idea that our addictions are a response to our thoughts and feelings. For example, Washton and Boundy said that a “faulty belief system lies at the root of addiction” and that when we hold contradictory beliefs like “we are not enough and that we should be perfect,” it sets the stage for inner conflict and struggle. Dr. Glasser said that when we don’t **feel** love and worth, we give up, act out, experience depression or use addictions to relieve our pain and feelings of failure. Stanton Peele said that addiction is a way of “coping with life and artificially attaining feelings.” John Bradshaw wrote about our inability to face and deal with our emotional pain. And Lee Jampolsky described the “addictive personality” within us that continually tries to avoid pain and make ourselves feel better.

So how do we make sense of these ideas in our own lives? For example, what’s the connection between our own thoughts and feelings? Where does the pain come from, and why does it lead us to our Addictions? Here are some of the connections I’ve made for myself and how I made them.

Working with People with *Socially recognized Addictions.*

After years of taking other addicts through the [12 steps and the Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous](#), I coached hundreds of people one-on-one, spending 40 to 60 hours of intimate time with each person, going through the steps of “recovery” and applying them to many different kinds of addictions. (Note: That’s [my 12 Step background](#) speaking again. Thanks for understanding.) And during our time together, they would tell me how it all started.

People consistently told me that, before they began doing their habits or became addicted, they believed that [something was wrong with them](#). In other words, they had this core belief, deep down inside, that they were somehow bad, broken or not enough. The language they used was different for each person, but the theme was always the same. And I understood – because I remembered having that same

kind of belief before I began my addictions too.

For me, it was a belief that I was not fully loved. To make a long story short, my father left our family when I was very young. My mother later began dating a man I didn't like, and then moved us away from my childhood home to a different city. In my new school, I became an outcast from the other kids, and even from teachers I'd begun to trust. And that was when I began sniffing paint and varnish remover to make myself feel escape my feelings.

I'm not saying that these events "caused" me to become addicted. In fact, I choose to see that it's the destructive meanings and interpretations I made up about myself (in response to what happened to me in life) that drove me into my addictions. I'm the one that created the beliefs that "I'm wrong", "bad", "unlovable", "a mistake", "I don't deserve to live".

Now of course there is a paradox in what I just said. This is not about blaming me for becoming addicted BUT it is also not about blaming my circumstances, parents, or anyone else for that matter. This is simply a perspective that empowers me so I use it. It's a perspective I created by obsessively asking myself this question. "What is a possible way of looking at my past that, if I had looked at life that way back then, I might not have become addicted?" And more importantly, if I looked at my life that way, and [taught this perspective to kids](#) I'd have the greatest chance of preventing pain, suffering, addictions and suicide?"

Perhaps if I had been taught this [Power of Choice interpretation as a kid](#), the idea that, no matter what was going on around me, I always had the power to choose my thoughts, meanings and beliefs, I might not have chosen to hate myself. For me, I think this single message has the potential to move us in the direction of transforming all addictions on the planet.

I mean, think about this. For those kids that are being violently abused at home

and are turning to addictions as a form of relief (a relief that may even be preventing them from killing themselves), and then you teach these kids that drugs and alcohol are bad and you should stop because if you don't you will die, what impact could that have on those kids? Or that cigarettes and drugs are a gateway drug and will lead to greater addictions. What about the kid that is engaged in this thing we are calling a gateway drug? What if it's actually the *belief* that it could be a gateway drug that is the greatest determining factor on whether it becomes one or not; but, I don't have scientific evidence for this. (I've actually gotten advice from a number of medical addiction doctors on how to get funding for my school program and have learned that the program is not ideal for funding because it utilizes the "power of belief," which in the scientific and medical community has no value because it is considered part of the "placebo" effect. People like Dr. Bruce Lipton, author of *The Biology of Belief* as well as my previous ADHD psychiatrist, Umesh Jain agree with me though. Dr. Jain has encouraged me to find ways to scientifically measure the "placebo" as being an asset rather than an element that has no value. He said "what you are doing is using the placebo effect" to your benefit.

I don't deny the potential positive impact of educating some kids with the potential dangers of various behaviors, but when we give all of our youth the anti-whatever scare tactic message, and don't preface it by saying that ultimately the greatest power lies not in the drugs (or whatever behavior you are engaged in) but in your thoughts and beliefs, is it not possible that our good intentions might be actually killing some of them? I don't know, but personally I'm not willing to risk the possibility. What's the risk of teaching our youth that substances and behaviors are more powerful than them? What if these fear-based, controlling approaches are actually causing more damage and perpetuating the weaknesses, rather than empowering the greatness of our kids?

Dr. Jeffrey Schaler, author of **Addiction is a Choice**, agrees with me;

“Teaching people in treatment for addiction problems that they ‘don’t know they have a problem’ may create a problem for them. Teaching them that they cannot control themselves may convince them that they cannot control themselves. Teaching them to believe that ‘treatment’ is the only solution to their problem may persuade them that they cannot solve problems on their own. It reinforces dependency. Teaching them that addiction is all-or-nothing may influence them to believe they can never be anything other than sick. Teaching them they’re powerless encourages them to act powerless. Teaching them that abstinence is the only way to control their addiction may make them think that whenever they are not totally abstinent, they are out of control. Then, when they do take the drug, they make themselves feel as if they are out of control.”

Addicted People Believe Something is Fundamentally Wrong with Who they Are

The circumstances that provoke this belief that “something’s wrong with me” may be different for all of us. Perhaps we grew up in poverty or suffered abuse in our home. Maybe we lost a parent or a close friend at an early age, or were severely criticized or threatened when we did something others thought was “wrong” or “bad.” Or perhaps it was something much less dramatic. It could have been any event in our past.

I think ultimately what causes the belief that something is “wrong with us,” is that we were not raised in a community which taught and demonstrated that, regardless of what happened to us, we are the ones that made those events significant *through the meaning we attached to them*; and, that we always did - and do have - the power to choose our thoughts, meanings and beliefs, if we are committed to it.

That last sentence reminds me of a Facebook post I stumbled upon;

*“When you get that you add the meaning to life, that there is no meaning inherent in anything, that the significance you experience is a function of human interpretation, when you get this you are free, and therefore free to create. **The key, of course, is being willing to be responsible for the mess you have created so far!**” – Landmark Education (on FaceBook)*

I once coached a man who grew up in a beautiful home and had a great family. (I met them, so I can attest to this.) He was also a multimillionaire who owned a number of businesses. Yet this man struggled with crack cocaine and sex addictions. When he was a kid, he realized that he was gay. It was at a time when being gay wasn't accepted to the degree it is today. So the meaning he made up about himself (which society reinforced) was that he was evil and bad and didn't deserve to live. And why would he make up that meaning? I don't know. Maybe he overheard his parents talking about homosexuality as being “evil,” “wrong,” or “bad.” The originating moment when he unconsciously creating this belief for himself could have been as simple as a conversation he overheard while asleep. But, because he was not taught the power of his own thoughts, he may have given the words of others more power than his thoughts.

The Destructive Power of one Simple Question...

When we create the belief that something is wrong with us, our mind naturally wants to find out the reason why, so that we can correct the problem and feel better. So we begin asking ourselves a very simple question: “What's wrong with me?” It seems harmless enough. But then our mind asks it again, and again, and again: “What's wrong with me? What's wrong with me?”

What happens when we focus continually on a question like that? We start to get more and more evidence to support our belief that something is wrong with us. Then, whenever bad stuff happens – as it often does – our mind is unaware that we actually attracted this bad stuff by our thinking and so our belief is enforced

even more. Eventually, this belief is not a belief anymore. For us, it exists like “Truth”.

We may even start to think that bad things happened *because* there's something wrong with us. Conversely, when good things happen, we've become so used to thinking something's wrong that we start to doubt our good feelings, and we believe the good stuff won't last, and our belief becomes “true.” We may even feel guilty for having good feelings, or look for what's wrong in our “good” situation.

Of even equal importance is how this kind of thinking makes us feel. By asking "What's wrong?" all the time, we cause ourselves mental and emotional pain. (At least that is what the Cognitive Behavioral Therapists would say. i.e. Thoughts cause Feelings.) And this has a spiraling effect. The worse we feel, the more we ask the question. And the more we ask the question, the worse we feel.

Eventually our discomfort grows to the point where we need relief from it so bad, and that's when we turn to something (anything – it is a matter of emotional survival) to anything that even resembles peace, comfort or pleasure. So we smoke a cigarette or take a drink. We go to the mall and shop. Or perhaps we blow up at someone – whether at home, at work or on the highway – and suddenly we think we feel free again!

Unfortunately, it doesn't last long. Soon the good feeling goes away and the discomfort returns (and sometimes it's worse), so we do the behavior a second time in an attempt to get the good feeling back. And for many of us, this cycle happens again and again. Over time it becomes a habit, and when the discomfort keeps getting worse and the pleasure less, that habit becomes a compulsion, or even an addiction. The thing we once used to "escape" how we feel is now causing us more pain than before we started doing it. And it seems as though we have no control.

But here's the key. For me, I choose to believe that the substance or behavior we're doing didn't cause us to feel this way. The thoughts and feelings came first. Before the behavior came the belief. And our habit is now just a symptom – an attempt to escape from the pain or discomfort we feel inside.

How Common is This?

Every addicted person I've ever known believes there is 'something fundamentally wrong with them'. However, what I've learned since is that it doesn't just apply to addicts (depending on how you define "addicts" of course!).

Somewhere deep within the human mind, there seems to be a belief that we are "not enough." (Many people have written about this — I'm definitely not the first.) For some of us, it comes up as a belief that we aren't "good" enough, "strong" enough, or "lovable" enough. For others, it's that we don't "know" enough, "have" enough or "look good" enough.'

This belief that we are not enough shapes our thinking and behavior in significant ways. For example, we may begin to see ourselves as either inferior to other people or as superior to them (which is actually a defense against feeling inferior). In order to compensate, we try harder and harder to be better and better. So, we excel at things like school, sports or work. Alternatively, we may try to get others to admire, appreciate or love us; or we may try to control people or the world around us so that we feel "safe." However, the more we do these things, the more energy we are actually giving to those underlying thoughts — that we will never have, do or be quite enough.

Many of us believe that we are not okay as we are. And since it's not a subject we talk much about, we think we're the only ones who feel this way.

Trying to Make Ourselves Feel Better

Believing that something is wrong with us or that we're "not enough" has deep impacts. It provokes feelings of unhappiness, emptiness and lack. It generates thoughts that we're bad or guilty for some reason, even though we don't know why. This leads us to doubt our worth and our value. So we begin making choices that are not in our best interest. We become easily influenced by others. And we do things to please others, get attention, or get along.

Instead of doing the work necessary to create a life we really want, we choose the "easier, softer way" – addictive substitutes that replace having a full, rich and powerful life.

Here are some more examples of what that might look like:

- If we are feeling powerless and worried about our life, we may try to get that power back by demonstrating power over our kids by controlling them. We may avoid worrying about our life by worrying about our kids – or anyone else for that matter.
- If we're feeling empty, we may try to 'fill ourselves up' through food, drink, entertainment or activity.
- If we don't think we're good enough, we may use over-working or taking care of others to feel "enough."
- If we don't believe we have value, we may try to prove our worth through over-performing or trying to attract the praise of others.
- If we see ourselves as weak or vulnerable, we might suppress our feelings and emotions (such as tears, anger, tenderness or love) and become tougher and more aggressive.
- If we're afraid of being "wrong," we may do everything we can to be right and not make mistakes.

- If we believe we're not lovable, we may compromise ourselves sexually or emotionally to get love, acceptance or esteem from others.

By the way, this is not meant as a criticism of any of these behaviors. They are all “survivor mode” responses to not feeling good enough. But with each of these choices, we are actually burying or forgetting our true self. We use them to feel safe instead of growing, or to mask our real thoughts and feelings instead of being honest with ourselves and others. And eventually, we start to forget how we really feel and what we really want inside. We become, as the Pink Floyd song goes, “comfortably numb.”

In the short term, our addictions seem like excellent solutions to fill the gaps we feel inside. But in the long term, they actually perpetuate more problems — because we haven't dealt with how we think and feel underneath.

Seeing Our Problems as Outside of Ourselves

In addition to using these kinds of behaviors to make ourselves feel better, we also compensate by choosing thoughts that do the same thing. So we say things to ourselves like: “I didn't do anything wrong; *they* did it to me.” Or, “There's nothing I can do. Other people are my problem.” The value of these thoughts is that they protect us from feeling wrong, guilty or bad by putting or “projecting” responsibility onto others. However, they also stop us from looking at the “real” source of our bad feelings, and *we begin to see ourselves as victims, which for me is the ultimate tragedy and what I am really out to transform.*

We think we're dissatisfied because we don't have enough money, the right job or the best car. We have a wife who doesn't understand or a husband who doesn't appreciate us. Or maybe it's that we're not the right height, weight, age or body type to be accepted by others. If we just looked better, then we would be happy.

All of these can certainly influence our self image and happiness. Yet in truth, none of them really matters because they're not the cause of our feelings. We could change any one of them and feel better for a while. But ultimately, it won't last, because they weren't the real problem. As long as we believe we're not loveable or good enough, our mind will continue collecting evidence to support our belief.

Seeing the outside world as the source of our discomfort or problems is very common. This then leads us into judging and criticizing others, or into chronic blaming and complaining about whatever is happening – a key trait of noticed in ALL addicted people I've known (including myself). By seeing ourselves as victims, we are unconsciously choosing to not take responsibility for our life. Why? Because we can't see there is any other choice from the perspective of "victim." Or the opposite may happen. We might start trying to save others or change the world to make ourselves feel better. (I've done that too!). But instead of doing it from love and acceptance, we do it out of feelings of lack, fear, anger or a need to impose it on others, instead of giving them the [Power of Choice](#).

Do We All Look for "What's Wrong?"

If you see yourself in anything I've just said, you might be feeling a little uncomfortable right now. Let me reassure you that that's not the purpose, and there's no need to be embarrassed or to beat yourself up about it. Because it's not just you — it's all of us. I still do it, just not nearly to the degree I used to.

I once heard a church minister state that this "blaming mentality" started with Adam and Eve. (Whether this is true or not, I don't know; but I loved the perspective.) He said that when God asked Adam why he ate of the tree of knowledge, Adam blamed both God and Eve, saying something like, "It was because of this woman you gave me!" Seeing the problem as either God's fault

for creating Eve, or Eve's fault for giving him the apple was just Adam's way of putting responsibility onto others so that he didn't have to look at himself, because he perceived that that would have been too painful.

Another explanation for why we look for "what's wrong" in life is described well by Mark F. Weinstein in his book, *Habitually Great: Master Your Habits, Own Your Destiny*. In it he says that we have a societal predisposition for focusing on the negative. Here's the way he puts it.

"The 'Seeing What's Wrong Habit' is a Habit embedded in American culture. It is a good example of a helpful perspective that has been overemphasized. The Habit permeates the way information is presented and shared throughout the media. It is so pervasive that our conversations are cast in its mold; we rush to judgment and spend a lot of time talking about what's wrong, criticizing an event or people or anything, rather than seeing what's right."

Weinstein then goes on to say that, "the roots of this Habit can often be found within our families of origin. Perhaps your mother or father was an expert at seeing what's wrong. And there you were at three, four or five years of age listening to somebody who is an authority on what's wrong. Given such a history, it would be hard for you not to grow up with that Habit; you would have been stamped with it."

Why we keep substituting one bad habit or addiction with another

In the last section, I referred to an important concept that may have gone by a bit unnoticed, so I'd like to begin with it here. It's the idea/viewpoint that *our thoughts cause our feelings*. What I mean by that is this: when our thoughts are predominantly negative (about ourselves, others and life), these thoughts generate negative feelings. Conversely, when are thoughts are predominantly positive – when we see the good in people and the possibilities in life, our feelings are going to be more positive (PEACEFUL) as well.

I am a huge fan of the artist Sting and one of his songs comes to mind. “Let your Soul be your Pilot.” What if the word “soul” could be substituted with the word “feelings?” What if our feelings are our soul speaking to us? Speaking to us about what? Maybe our feelings are a gift to us – giving us access to knowing if our life is on track to getting what we really want from life? Could it be that simple? Probably not, right? But then again, who gets to make up the meaning? You do!!

This perspective, helps us understand and connect some of the different perspectives we've gotten from the experts I quoted, the addicted people I've worked with, and the links between addictions and unproductive habits. Let me do a quick recap to show you what I mean:

What some of the experts said was, "if we don't have love, worth and happiness, we're going to have pain inside. And if we don't deal with the pain, we're going to use substances and behaviors to feel better." What the "addicts" said (I don't like labeling people) was that they believed something was fundamentally wrong with them (and often avoided dealing with that root belief by looking for what's wrong with others and the world around them). They then used their addictions to feel better, but because they still saw themselves as wrong/inferior/bad, they felt even more guilt and shame for engaging in their addictions.

This core idea – that our negative thoughts and beliefs generate negative feelings – is what I believe is *driving our addictions and unproductive habits*. The more negatively we think and subsequently feel, the more we want to escape those thoughts and feelings in some way. And the way most people do that is by finding a substance or activity that distracts them from feeling pain, or makes them feel a little more peaceful even if only temporary.

This process is something I've seen countless times in myself and others. It looks something like this. Someone will engage in a behavior that they "like or enjoy," but some part of them wants to stop. Afterwards, they judge themselves, telling themselves that they are bad, wrong, dumb or stupid for doing it. With those thoughts come feelings of discomfort or guilt about their behavior and their inability to stop it, and about how they perceive others are judging them for it. This judgment and guilt brings them more mental anguish and emotional pain. And then, even though they want to stop, they eventually engage in the behavior again (or substitute with another "addiction") in order to avoid or escape this emotional discomfort or pain. Over time, the cycle becomes self-perpetuating.

If this might be what's driving us to engage in our addictive habits – then finding ways to reduce and replace our negative thoughts and feelings (self-judgment, guilt, etc.) would seem to make a lot of sense.

The Impact of Labeling People

If negative thinking, judgment, guilt and shame are at the root of all addictions, then we should probably have a close look at how ours and societies judgments around the word “addiction” itself may be impacting those we care about.

When we call something an addiction, many people immediately attach certain beliefs and meanings to it. For example, we think of these addictive behaviours as being “bad, wrong or unacceptable.” We may also judge the person the same way – especially if we see it as a choice they're making and not just as a disease or something they “can't control.” So we have thoughts like, “They shouldn't be doing that. They're self-indulgent. They are weak. They don't have enough willpower.” Or that they should stop, clean up and “get a life.” Unable to accept, understand, or even look at our own unproductive behaviors, we project and label others or put them in a “negative box” in order to feel more comfortable ourselves. Maybe we give others a label that means that they are unable to change so that we don't have to take responsibility for supporting them – or having the power or willingness to change our own behavior? But what impact is our thinking having on the other person? And if WE are the one with the addiction, how is it affecting us – since many of us are even harsher with ourselves than we are with someone else?

So, given the fact that, as soon as we call something an addiction, other beliefs come up, let's consider it from a personal perspective. For example, we may see ourselves as powerless or as victims; believe that we've done something wrong and “should” feel ashamed or guilty; or be afraid that others will be angry at us or

judge us for it; we may even think that we “deserve” to suffer; and so on. Each time we think about our “addiction,” more of these thoughts and feelings (often hidden or unconscious) are generated, because it’s become part of our mindset about addictions.

This is why I’ve come to believe that it can sometimes be hurtful to judge another person’s behavior as an “addiction.” That doesn’t mean that we shouldn’t use the word, or make this assessment if we are the admitting staff at a treatment centre. But unless we can do it without disempowering judgment, this way of seeing and labeling people can be quite harmful. Why? Because people pick up on it. They hear it in our words and feel it in our energy. They know that we think that what they are doing is bad or wrong, even if we never say it. This reinforces their negative thoughts and feelings about themselves – and, in turn, fuels their addictions - and other unproductive habits even more.

The way we view, think about and talk about someone’s addiction may actually be contributing to their problem. And it’s is one of the reasons why I encourage people to decide for themselves about whether or not they want to use the word “addiction” to describe their problem.

How “Changing” the Behavior can fuel the Problem: Best of Intentions, Unintended Results

Many of us have deep feelings that are touched when we see someone doing drugs, drinking to excess, or doing some other behavior that we feel is destructive. And whether out of fear or compassion, we want to “help” — in other words, to get them to stop what they’re doing. But let’s look a little deeper at what happens when we want to get someone to change.

Here's one very common scenario: In our desire to help, we begin focusing on the other person's problem. We point out their "bad" behavior in order to be "constructive." We subtly start making suggestions about what they should do. If they don't hear us or make use of these suggestions, then we go further by actually telling them what to do, or making other efforts to control or change their actions. We may try to convince them that they need help. Or we threaten "consequences" if they don't do what we think is "best for them."

Our intention could be very well meaning and coming from genuine concern for them. However, what underlying messages are we sending out when we try to fix someone's behavior? The message is that something is wrong with their behaviour (and sometimes, with THEM). And this often has unintended, negative results that are actually the opposite of what we had intended. Why? Because our thoughts, words and actions reinforce the fundamental belief they have about their "wrongness".

Having been addicted to so many things myself, I can tell you something: We ALREADY think and feel this way! We already "know" we're bad and wrong. We already judge ourselves ruthlessly and try our best to fix ourselves. Having someone else treat us this way just confirms and adds to our own negative perceptions. And it really does *stimulate our desire to engage in our various addictions even more*, so we can avoid the discomfort.

What I've found continually in my work is that trying to fix, change or control others actually alienates the people we want to help. Whether it's a parent, a spouse, a friend or an addiction professional, if we are out to change someone or impose our choices on them, people perceive that very quickly. Many will then resist our efforts, lie to us, and avoid contact, because being around us reinforces their thoughts of being inferior or not good enough. Again, unintentionally, we are adding to the problem rather than alleviating it.

Labeling or fixing people can also separates us from them. Because underneath our language and actions is a kind of thinking that says, “These people have addictions, and I don’t.” “I’m okay, but they’re not.” Or “We’re fine, but they’re broken.” Putting our attention on their “bad” behaviors also lets us forget about our own. It blinds us to the things we are doing – the addictive behaviors or habits we indulge in – that, while they may not be as severe, still come from the same needy, hurting, compulsive or unfulfilled place inside. This is why I choose to see all addictions and “bad” habits as connected, because it reminds me that everyone might have them; and it stops me from looking at someone with “a problem” as being somehow different from myself.

Do You Have an Addictive or Bad Habit?

Now let’s bring all this down to a more personal level, one that everybody can identify with. Do you have a “bad habit” that you’d like to stop? Most of us would probably say that something we do is “bad,” right? And so what — it’s a harmless thought. Or is it...?

Yes, it’s true. We ALL do things that aren’t “the best” for us. So, we eat too many jelly donuts or buy too many shoes, obsess and worry about our love life or don’t spend enough time with the people who are important to us. It is human nature to do things that we think we shouldn’t, or to not do the things that we think we should. However, this time I’m not so much interested in the habits, but what we call them.

When we label something as “bad,” somewhere inside us we have a negative judgment about it. By using this word, what we’re really saying is that it’s “wrong” and we shouldn’t be doing it. This thinking may be subtle, but it’s there. And with these thoughts come negative feelings. In response, some part of us either thinks we should stop, or may actively try to get us to do so. And when we don’t, we

frequently feel like we've let ourselves down. So we try harder to get ourselves to change. Our thoughts grow more negative, and our feelings do too. We use more pressure, willpower or guilt to make ourselves stop. And even if we do manage to stop, we substitute with other bad habits or addictions, and comfort ourselves by knowing these substitutes are not as "Bad"! And the cycle continues.

Whether you see what you are doing (or thinking) as being a bad habit or an addiction, I'm asking you to consider the process that might be driving it, and that perhaps the problem is not the behavior you are doing, but your *belief in the "bad-ness"* of it.

To test this out, listen to your thoughts and feelings the next time you engage in whatever "bad" habit you may have. Notice any thoughts, judgments or beliefs you have about the rightness or wrongness of what you're doing. Watch the way you talk to yourself. And see if you begin judging yourself as well as the behavior. (For many of us, this is where our thinking goes.)

Next, watch to see if your negative thinking about the habit gets reinforced by people around you or society as a whole. One obvious example of this is weight and dieting. For example, how our spouse, friends or co-workers look at us or make comments about our weight. Or the way TV shows and public figures talk about being thin as "good." Or that we won't be loved or admired if we are heavy. What messages are you picking up from others?

Now, what happens if you stop your habit? Do you start to feel angry, frustrated or unhappy inside? And if you feel that way, do you eventually engage your habit again to feel better, but then feel worse for having "failed" or let yourself down? If this has ever happened to you, think back to that experience and see if the energy of the words like "bad," "wrong", "negative", or "guilty" were present for you. If so, ask yourself: "Was the problem really in WHAT I was doing, or my negative thoughts and feelings about myself and what I was doing?"

As a final thought: What do you think your life would look like if you were in the habit of NOT seeing yours or other people's habits or addictions as "bad", "wrong", or "negative"? For me, this is a habit worth mastering – and the key to ending the addiction substitution game – to being free – REALLY FREE - from ALL Addictions.

The Power of Focus

The more we focus on something, the more it grows in our thoughts, feelings and experience.

Here's an example: Let's say you're in the midst of a cold and snowy winter, and a friend tells you they're going on vacation to a beautiful, exotic and sunny place. What happens in your thinking? First you might say to yourself, "Wouldn't that be great? I could really use the rest." Then maybe you'd get jealous. "Oh yeah, they get to go but I don't. Why don't I ever get to go on vacation?" (It's part of looking at "what's wrong" with life, right?) After that you might say to yourself, "I wonder how much it would cost?" You begin noticing ads in newspapers, on TV or online. You start thinking about whether you can afford the time off. Then maybe you go as far as booking a trip, or you finally decide it's impossible and put it out of your mind. And all of that started with a simple comment from a friend. *The more we focus on something, the more it grows in us.*

The same process happens with addictions and "bad" habits, but in a negative way. Whenever we think about them, we are giving them our attention and energy. "I really shouldn't do that. That's bad, that's wrong. What if other people knew I was doing this?" And so on. The more we think about them, the more we generate negative feelings. And the more concerned, frustrated, guilty or upset we become, the more we lock them into our behavior. Similarly, the more critical we become of others, the more this reinforces their behaviors too. So is it any

surprise that we keep substituting our bad habits and addictions with other bad habits and addictions?

On a societal level, it's like the war on drugs. Sure, we might have some "victories" at times; but overall there doesn't appear to be any less drug use. While we are fighting one particular group of drugs we see as bad, other one's creep up (substitute) to take it's place. Have you noticed the increase in prescription drug addiction now? So is what we're doing really working? Perhaps it's the same principle at work. The more energy we give to what we don't want, the more we attract more of what we don't want? The more we focus on what's "bad," the more we keep attracting – and experiencing what's "bad" – which includes "bad habits and addictions". Kind of like how people leave one abusive relationship only to attract a different looking abusive relationship – substituting one abusive relationship with others.

Now let's consider the impact of some of the things I mentioned earlier: The way we label and judge people who have addictions or any "bad" habit. The negative energy we give them in our societal thinking, conversations and media. The fighting that goes on within the addictions field about "who's right" and "who's wrong," how to define addiction, what causes it, and the "right" way to deal with it.

At some point what hit me was that all of these are part of the larger problem. It's our negative "judgmentalism" around addictions and unwanted habits that I believe is fueling our "addictive" society.

How much does our trying to control or fix others actually perpetuate their problems? No one can say for sure; yet every mother who brings their child to me for counseling or coaching eventually gets this idea when I explain it to them this way: "Have you ever noticed, when you worry a lot or try to fix your child, that they often react negatively, or do even more of what you want them to stop?"

“Yeah, I’ve seen that!” they’ll say. “So, although it’s with good intentions, isn’t what you are doing actually having the opposite result?” I ask. And suddenly they see it. “OH MY ____! I didn’t realize that my worrying was actually reinforcing their problem.” And often times just knowing this makes no difference for them either because they too are addicted - addicted to fixing and controlling people. And that’s when they begin looking for a different way to help the people they care about.

So when we try to control, pressure or guilt ourselves into changing a bad habit or addiction (whether it be in ourselves or others), we are actually giving the thing we want to change power.

Interestingly, the same thing happens when we compare our behaviors to others’, or try to hide them. Let’s say I focus on your addiction, but keep mine private. (You’re a drug addict on the street, but I do my “habit” in the privacy of my home.) Maybe I see yours as “more serious” (like drinking or gambling) and minimize the importance of my own (excessive worrying or over-eating). Or perhaps mine is more socially acceptable – like shopping, over-working or trying to change others – and people encourage or even praise me for doing it. “Wow, look at how much she cares,” they say, as I’m out there fixing the world.

Now don’t get me wrong. I’m not trying to say we shouldn’t try to change personally, or that there’s something wrong with helping others or making a difference. But the issue is HOW we do it, and what is really driving us to “change”. If we are continually criticizing our own habits and addictions, or telling others not to do them, we are growing negative thoughts and feelings. The same is true when we are arguing about how to deal with addictions or whose definition or approach is right. We are still contributing to what fuels the addiction substitution game. At least that’s the way it appears to me.

Using Labels to Avoid Responsibility

There's one last way we use the words "addiction" and "bad" habits that I think is worth mentioning here. It's a bit hidden, but perhaps you'll recognize it.

Many people now use the word "addiction" very liberally. It's something we see all over. When I do talks in schools, I hear kids talking about their addictions, regardless of what issue they have or how severe it may be. The same happens in our popular media, as celebrities talk about their addiction to this or that. It's like the term "everyday addictions" — the idea is now being applied to almost any kind of behavior we have difficulty stopping. This can be very useful, because it's normalizing the word — taking the morality out of it, making it something we can all identify with, and taking some of the shame and blame out of it. However, it also has its downside, because at times we are using it to avoid taking responsibility for our behaviors.

Sometimes what we have might not be an addiction. However we hide behind the word because it implies that "there's nothing we can do about it" or that change is beyond our control. And the real truth is that we just don't want to change, or we feel guilty about what we're doing and our inability to stop doing it.

Used in this way, saying "I'm addicted" becomes an easy way out. And I've done that with different issues in my own life. I once believed I was addicted to junk food and drinking coffee. Yes, I had other "real" addictions, so I thought it made sense to say that these were too. But what I didn't understand then was that there was a pay-off to it. And the pay-off was, "I don't have to be responsible for doing what I would need to do to break free of my eating habits."

Why Do We Do That?

One of the reasons we use Labels to hide behind is that many of us are afraid to tell the truth about what's really going on. In my case, it was, "I'm eating junk

food. I know it's not good for me. But I have no desire to change. I'm not committed to doing so and I'm tired of being fixed and judged by others for not eating the way they wanted me to. They won't accept my choices, so maybe calling it an addiction might shut them up." In other words, it was a defence, a way to protect myself, something I could even joke about: "Hey, what can I do? I'm addicted to it!" What I was really saying was "Stop judging me," so people would leave me alone about my behavior. I didn't just do this for them though. I did it to justify the behavior in my own mind as well.

In my case, the word "addiction" was what I used. However, the term "bad habit" gets used in exactly the same way. In fact, that one is really common: "I want to lose weight, but I have this 'bad habit' of eating sweets or junk food." "I want to be on time, but I have this bad habit of being late." "I want to be more active, but I have this bad habit of watching too much TV." It's become a way of letting ourselves off the hook; of saying to others, as well as to ourselves, "There's nothing I can do. I have no control." So, we unwittingly choose to become "victims" to our own bad habits and addictions.

Getting rid of guilt and shame about our behaviors is absolutely critical. In fact, that is why we can't totally negate the benefits of the 12 step or disease model of addiction for all people. For people who believe that they are bad and wrong for destroying their life and the lives of others - that they are worthless at the deepest level – believing in the viewpoint that they have a disease that they were born with, is often the perfect place to begin the process of letting go of the self-hatred. Of course this model is not the best for everyone; but no model is the best for everyone! And I really do include my model in that statement too!! Mine is not superior! In fact, it could hurt some people if even presented to them as even possibly being true. What do I mean? If my perspective is coming from a viewpoint that we ultimately are the "cause" of our addictions, some people can't hear the word "cause" as being different from "blame". For those people, believing they are the "cause" of their problems, could have them thinking they

are to blame for them being sexually abused or traumatized at a level none of us has the right to say we “understand”. Heck I would go so far as to say that imposing my perspective on certain people could provoke suicide – which if I did it “knowing” what I know – would not be suicide but murder.

If unconditional acceptance was present from the very beginning, I wonder if we would have no need to remove the guilt or shame about our behaviors. In fact, I wonder if many of them would never have turned into addictions. But for me, “unconditional” includes also not judging or seeing anything wrong with even “guilt” or “shame.” It is a choice I make to be willing to look for (and create) the perfection in everything.

Thanks for reading this far! This book used to end right here but I felt I had to add more content for my message to feel whole and complete. In the next week I am hoping to send you more writing – if not, I’ll send you some video’s – and definitely get more writing to you in no more than two weeks. Not sure if it is going to be a full chapter or what it is going to look like exactly just yet but it will be from the heart.

Thanks for your patience and for honoring me with your time, attention, and for considering my ideas.

Scott

p.s. Oh yeah, I really would love to hear your thoughts, comments or questions if you have time to post them on <http://www.addictionandchoice.com/community.html> ?

Acceptance, Love, and the Power of Choice

About 18 months ago, I coached a woman who had severe self-harm behaviors. Sarah was a recovered crack cocaine addict and someone who's well respected in Cocaine Anonymous circles, but she was regularly using razor blades to cut herself. She felt that this was an addiction too, yet was unable to stop.

When Sarah came to see me, she was really down on herself. "I can't stop thinking about cutting, Scott. I just can't stop thinking about it," she said desperately. So I began taking her through some of the principles I've described in this book, and how to apply them to her life. We talked about her judgments and self-talk around cutting. About the power of her thoughts, and why giving more energy to "trying not to" was actually making her do it more. And how she could try looking at "what's right" in her behavior and life, instead of always seeing what's wrong.

For several years I had been consciously training myself to see what was "right" in each person's behavior. Therefore, when we met I began by seeing her as perfect, whole and complete, choosing to see that *whatever* she was doing was in some

way good. At one point I even said, quite sincerely, “Sarah, what’s wrong with cutting? It’s your body. Yes, you are cutting yourself. But other people do weird stuff too. We all do stuff. And there’s nothing ‘wrong’ with it.” We spent almost an hour talking about just that one belief.

Later in our meeting I asked Sarah, “In those moments when you cut yourself, does the physical pain of the cut provide a temporary sense of ease and comfort from all the bad, crazy and judgmental thoughts that were going on in your head just before doing it?” She looked up at me with one of those ‘how did you know?’ kind of glances, and said “YES!” This wasn’t just a guess on my part; I’d heard it from other people who have self-harm behaviors. It’s also what Dr. William Glasser described about addictions in the last chapter: they’re a ‘successful strategy’ for coping with what is going on inside us.

When Sarah got the message that there really was nothing wrong with her or what she was doing – the choice to do something different (if she wanted to) became available. Suddenly she realized that she didn’t have to judge or condemn herself any more, and that it was her own self-condemnation that had turned her “habit” into an addiction.

Just knowing this wasn’t enough to stop her mind from doing it, however. So we then explored other issues that could also be at the root of her problem – in other words, driving her negative thoughts and feelings which led her to cut – and how to turn these around. For example, the value of having a vision for her future. What secrets she had been hiding in her life and what she was currently doing that was not honoring herself. And what small promises she could make to herself about cleaning up these issues – or what I call ‘coming into integrity’ with ourselves.

One of things we uncovered was that for years she had been doing all kinds of service-work to help drug addicts. However, a lot of it she did so that she would

be accepted by her friends in Cocaine Anonymous; *and* out of the fear that, if she didn't help all these addicts, she might relapse herself.

I gave Sarah permission to look at what she'd really like to do, if the fear and need to be accepted were not driving her to "help" people. And when she saw the impact of not fully giving her heart to those she was helping, and understood there's nothing wrong with *not* wanting to help everyone, something shifted. She was able to look inside and tell herself the truth about what she really wanted to be doing with her life, which was being a karate instructor and becoming a lawyer. That was a big step for her, because it finally gave her some 'positive motivation' to move forward, instead of all the negativity she'd used for so many years to try to make herself change.

Sarah didn't want to stop helping addicts altogether; but you could say that she implemented a 'harm reduction program' for her own co-dependency in that area. After our meeting, she began having the conversations she'd previously been avoiding – telling people, whose respect she deeply wanted, about her new boundaries, what kinds of people to refer to her, and who she really wanted to help. (As it turned out, it was really only the severely desperate female crack-heads who were in the process of losing their children.)

Finally, we created a small game-plan and structure of accountability for Sarah to support what she was promising to do; one that didn't rely on me, but on a community of close friends who she trusted would not judge her for the changes she wanted to make in her life.

Our session lasted four hours, and we never had any other appointments.

What Impact Did It Have?

Two days later, Sarah called me all excited and said: "Scott, I've stopped cutting!" She was ecstatic. When she told me what had happened since we met, I asked if I could record our conversation so as to share some of these experiences in her own words. Here are a few of the things she said:

"Self harm is something I've struggled with my whole life, particularly with cutting or self mutilation. Even during my most rigorous addiction recovery programs, it's never been something I've been able to master until I worked with you. The last few nights have been the first time in six months that I haven't really struggled with a strong craving and desire to cut myself. In fact, the idea didn't even cross my mind.

When you said that we are 'restless, irritable and discontented' when we don't have a future to live into, that really connected. I've always wondered why we feel that way. Then suddenly I realized it's because we are without a vision. My strongest cravings to self-injure are in what I call the 'dead times' in my life; times when I'm on a break from school or some other significant activity in my life. When I don't have that vision active for myself, that's when my cravings come back.

As I listened to you talk about this, it was like a spiritual resonance. Suddenly my spirit said, 'Yes, of course. That's it. You're without vision for your life.' And I felt peace. It wasn't just my spirit; it was my mind too. It made rational sense. I don't have to sacrifice anything here by trusting in an outside power. It all comes from within.

During our time together, I saw what my deeper vision is and that I haven't been allowing myself to live it, because I didn't feel empowered enough to do that. Something in me shifted, and I've now made a decision that I can act on it instead of living somebody else's dream. This is what really broke my addiction – understanding my need to live my vision."

"I've always condemned myself for my self-mutilation. 'This is bad and wrong. I shouldn't be doing it. I don't want to do it.' Those thoughts are going through my head all the time and it had become a monster that bound me.

What I came to see is that there is 'nothing wrong' here; I can stop making myself wrong for what I've been doing. At first, that seemed counter-intuitive to me. But when I made the decision to just accept and open up to it, that there really is nothing 'wrong' with what I'm doing, it completely diffused the power it had over me. And all of a sudden I was free from it."

Out of Alignment with Herself

"The integrity piece was my next step to becoming powerful and happy. I just wasn't happy before, and that's partly why I've been cutting. I've been playing out all these anxieties and lying all the time about these things. Even if it's been in sort of non-offensive ways, there are tiny, little parts all over my life that need to be cleared up.

So over the last day or two, I've been ridding myself of these anxieties by exposing the secrets I have been keeping. I told my Mum about my cutting. I talked to my boy friend about things that are blocking us in our relationship, and those have been cleared up too."

"One of the things I do in my life is help others by taking them through the 12-step process. But what our talk also helped me realize is that I've been doing a lot of that out of fear, and so I can look good to others.

When I came into the 12-steps, I was told that I had to help people so I could stay clean and sober myself, and that people with really admirable sobriety worked a lot with newcomers. As a result, I thought I needed to do that too – and if I didn't, I would be wrong, shameful, or 'not admirable.'

The truth is, I only want to help enough addicts to keep my own recovery going... and deal only with the hardest cases, the ones who really, really want recovery. Some people see that as selfish or not giving back enough. But the fact is, when I give to people and I don't really want to, that is out of integrity. I'm doing it because I want to look good for the fellowship. And that's what is really selfish and

destructive. I've been thinking that way for 10 years, and programming my mind to feel guilty because of it. But now I'm working at letting that go."

"I have kept my cutting a secret, from almost everyone, for most of my life. It's just one of many secrets I've had. And my experience of guilt, of seeing myself as wrong or selfish, have already started to change as I start exposing the secrets I've been keeping.

What struck me was how fast this process is, and how quickly it started working. Other recovery programs can take quite awhile, some of them years. But this happened right away."

What If I Had "Tried to Change" Her?

I honestly believe that these results could not have been accomplished if I had tried to change Sarah or her behaviors; in fact, if I had had an agenda to get her to do anything. It certainly wouldn't have happened if I'd told her not to cut or had any judgment about her for doing so, because seeing the possibility that she truly was and is "whole, complete and perfect," no matter what she does or does not do, was part of what helped her to shift her negative thinking and stop cutting.

Acknowledging that her self harm was actually a brilliant, creative and radical (in this case meaning "good") strategy she had invented, to survive uncontrollable thoughts and emotional pain, was where we had to start. Why? Because changing behaviors without changing perceptions and core beliefs usually doesn't last. Most people end up substituting one destructive habit or addiction for another, because they haven't yet dealt with the real roots of their problem.

Had we not first dealt with "there's nothing wrong with you or what you are doing," Sarah would have had no "access" to the different thinking she described, and or to her new, internally-motivated behaviors. My belief is that she would simply have continued criticizing herself, fighting against the wrongness or badness of her addictions, saying "yes" to what others wanted her to do (out of

co-dependence and people pleasing) – even though this was violating herself – and therefore probably have continued her cutting as well.

18 Months Later

When Sarah told me what happened for her, I was astounded by the difference we were able to make in just four hours together. And I would love to say that that one session permanently solved all of her problems – but that would not be true.

Because communities of people often have more power than an individual, especially when that individual is struggling with co-dependency issues, Sarah slowly slipped back into the expectations of the world and people around her. So although she stopped her long-standing cutting habit, as well as cigarette smoking (about two weeks after our session), she eventually substituted these habits with anorexia. Then about ___ months ago, almost at the point of death, she went into a residential treatment center for this condition, and it probably saved her life.

Since her recovery from anorexia, Sarah has now become ‘addicted’ to rage, hatred and abuse. This anger is being projected on almost everyone in her world, from strangers to close friends and family. Some might call this a ‘totally new problem,’ and be tempted to either condemn or pity her for it. However, from my perspective it is simply her new way of coping with what is going on inside.

When she told me about this problem recently, I surprised her by saying ‘thank you for expressing your anger outward toward others instead of inward towards yourself – because that nearly brought you to death from anorexia.’ And that might sound a bit odd to some, that I would thank her for abusing others. So here’s the distinction and insight. It’s not that I’m condoning, praising or encouraging her to hurt people. The point is, she *already* hates and condemns herself for how she is treating others. So making her ‘even more wrong’ for this isn’t going to help her change.

My interest was in seeing what's right about her, so as to help stop this cycle of self-defeating thinking and behavior. And that's what 'accepting her for it' did. Because several days after I acknowledged the "perfection" of her new habit, Sarah decided to come and see me again.

(By the way, what I said wasn't a manipulation to try to get her to seek my help. I truly meant it – because I'd rather see her here alive, being angry and hurtful, than dead from self hatred.)

Sarah's experience bears out what I've seen with so many other people (and myself); that, until we get to what's driving us to do them, we will keep substituting one destructive habit with another. It's our thoughts and feelings underneath that are calling out for resolution.

I honestly don't know what is going to happen next for Sarah, other than that I will continue to coach her to go beyond "right and wrong." Because I now believe that this kind of thinking – and the guilt and expectations that come from it – are what lie at the root of all our addictions. And that's why this type of "unconditional acceptance" has also become the cornerstone of my work. Because I know it works.

The impact of judgment

When we do something we "shouldn't" or don't do something we "should," it touches a place inside that many of us know only too well: a place of feeling wrong, bad or guilty. "You should stop that. You shouldn't be eating junk food because you're already overweight," we tell ourselves. Or, "You shouldn't be shopping so much. You're spending too much money." It could be anything (so use whatever words fit for you). Or maybe it's the reverse: "You should be exercising more. You should be eating healthier. You should be earning more money..." Whatever the 'wrong' behavior is, we judge ourselves for it. And with that judgment come subtle – or NOT so subtle – feelings of guilt, shame or badness.

For some of us (like Sarah), at times like this we become so self-critical that we “hate ourselves” inside. Or we may frantically try to change whatever it is that we’re doing. However, it’s worth repeating one more time that our behavior is not the problem. It is actually our temporary solution to a deeper issue. The real problem is what is “making us” do it or what is driving our actions. And if that is our negative thoughts and feelings, then anything we think, say or do that reinforces these will actually only *add to the problem*.

So what can we do to turn this around, to escape the shame and blame we pile on ourselves and others? For me, the answer lies in the concept of unconditional acceptance and love, because it reduces the negativity inside us.

How do we show unconditional love and acceptance? There are many, many different ways: By not using negative labels such as bad and wrong to judge our behaviors (or someone else’s), even if society might see them that way; By starting to consciously accept ourselves and our behavior, regardless of what we’re doing - and our willingness (or lack of willingness) to change; By choosing to see what’s right in whatever someone is doing, instead of what’s wrong; By being honest with ourselves about how we feel, what we want, and the choices we’re making; And by shifting from avoidance to taking responsibility for what we are doing. These are just a few starting points.

Instead of feeling like we need to hide behind words like “addictions” or “bad habits,” wouldn’t it be cool if we could just be straight with ourselves with no fear of being judged by others? For example, looking in the mirror and saying, “I’m over-weight, but I’m not committed to losing any of it,” but then not feeling ashamed or thinking that there’s anything wrong with that choice. Or looking at our behavior honestly, and loving ourselves for whatever we’re choosing to do. “Yes, I’m eating these French fries. Does that mean that I’m not changing my eating habits or doing more exercise? Yes, it does ... but I’m okay with that.” (I know that that probably sounds impossible to some readers. But that shows how deeply our “lack of self-acceptance” and negative thinking goes.)

Making this shift from forcing or guilt-tripping ourselves, to accepting ourselves as we are, is a major one for most of us. I've been practicing it and teaching it for several years, so I understand just how tough it can be. I also know that teaching (and giving it to others) is the source of my constant improvement with this habit. Yet what I've discovered is that it's also tremendously freeing. Instead of continually trying to correct, fix or pressure myself into changing, I find it much more peaceful to be honest and accepting. "Yes, I know that running every day, eating salads and drinking water would help me lose weight and feel better, but I don't want to do all that right now, and I might never want to. Yes I know I might get diabetes but I am willing to be responsible with that consequence now everyone please leave me alone!!! Now what is interesting is that by giving myself that freedom to not change, I lost close to 50LBS and have kept it off for the past 6 months without ever going on any diet. What I find interesting (well not really), cause this is how it often works, is after "recovering" from numerous addictions over the last 10 years and all the time being unable to break free of my bread and sugar addiction, I actually made the choice to implement new physical health habits only after everyone worried and concerned about my health, had given up on me and finally stopped trying to control me. That is usually how it works. Here is how addicts think from my experience. If I am going to deal with this addiction, there is no way I am going to allow anyone to take any credit for it. If I am going to do this, the choice and the results I get are 100% gonna be mine alone. Anything other than that is co-dependence!

Isn't This Just a License to "Do What We Want?"

Yes it is! And, this is another one of those paradoxical answers, of which there are many when we begin the journey of replacing the habitual right-wrong-negative thinking, with a commitment to mastering good-bad-positive thinking. Giving myself (and others) this kind of unconditional acceptance makes me feel better, more relaxed and at peace. I also like myself more, because I'm treating

myself with greater love and respect. It's one of the ways I honor myself for who I am and for who I am not. On one hand, this gives me more permission to do whatever I want to do. I get it. Yet at the same time, it paradoxically gives me a sense of freedom and opens the door to so many possibilities and choices that were previously unavailable to me. I feel so much better about myself, am able to listen to, and feel my feelings. I now use my feelings as my guide and compass to tell me which choices honor who I am. The one's that have me feel the most peace (not excitement) always seem to lead me in the direction that serves others in the biggest way. When I do make choices without considering how I feel, it always leads to drama and problems for me and others. Acceptance opens the door to the possibility of something different happening.

I was once taught that "selfishness is the root of our problems." And it is a valid perspective for dealing with "an" addiction. But for me, freedom from all addiction lies in what Jim Rohn called "Selfish enlightenment". This isn't "self indulgence" either. In all my Habit Mastery Success programs, I teach people the value of doing things that take them outside of their comfort zone, if doing those things leads to the experience of more peace. These are simple steps and behaviors to begin growing positive habits. Yet no matter how small they are, I know this is going to make people feel uncomfortable, because going beyond our comfort zone always is! However, this is part of how we get out of our old ruts – and our addiction to "ease and comfort."

Thus it's not "one or the other," it's both: giving people unconditional acceptance and love AND encouraging them to take steps to change, if that is what serves them; helping them to honestly accept themselves as they are AND beginning to make choices that move them in the direction of what they most want in their life – which only they can know because knowing it comes from listening to what gives them the most peace. So that is why these choices aren't mine; and can only come from the people I serve. It's what they decide they want to do, freely and authentically. Because people always fail at what they are not committed to,

so supporting people, and giving people permission to tell the truth about what they actually committed to without judgment, is what makes the maximum difference to others and myself. And this is what creates lasting change. Unconditional acceptance of wherever you are right now is the foundation, that brings the internal peace and willingness out of which honest choice and authentic change can come and last.

Here's another example of that. A young teen attended one of my high school programs some months ago. It turns out that he came because he was concerned about the amount of marijuana he was smoking. After my 4 week Habit Mastery program ended, I was invited by the school to speak with him and his entire Habit Mastery Club we created together when I was there. He told me (and the group) that he was now smoking half the amount of pot he did before – and a month before, he hadn't thought that that was ever going to be possible.

I asked him what he thought had helped him to change. And what he said was that I gave him permission to stop beating himself up about his habit any more. He wasn't shaming himself, thinking that he was a bad person, or hating himself for what he'd been doing. This new thinking habit gave him the power to cut down his smoking. He also said that, going into the program, he thought he "would never, ever, ever, ever be able to stop" smoking pot. However, now he believed that it was truly possible that one day he could get off it entirely.

What is the Meaning of "Love and Acceptance?"

After reading an early draft of this book, a woman named Angel sent me an email to share her views about this subject. Here's a brief excerpt of what she said:

Dear Scott:

Treating others with love does not necessarily mean allowing others to do as they wish...

I believe in order to help an addict in the long run there must be boundaries. Unconditional love and acceptance should not be equated with being a doormat for their abusiveness, a bank machine to feed their habit, and an excuse for their friends and families to put their lives on hold, waiting for the addict to come around. Unconditional love and acceptance should be tempered with boundaries.

For example: I will love and accept you always but unless I can see you working towards sobriety by going to rehab, I cannot permit you to disrupt my daily life and I cannot allow you around our children or family unsupervised. Example#2: I will always love and accept you, but I cannot sit around and wait for you to change your mind about going to rehab or getting help. You need to know that I will continue to move forward in my life regardless of what you choose to do, although I would hope that you would choose sobriety. - Angel

So what do you think? Is this the way we should deal with addicts or people with destructive behaviors? This is definitely a useful viewpoint on what unconditional acceptance and love could look like. Yet at the same time, other people will have other perspectives. Just as with “addictions” and “bad habits,” the words “love” and “acceptance” mean different things to different people. So for me, there are no “right” answers. Just like “Addictions,” no single definition or interpretation works for everyone. Therefore it’s up to you to decide. It’s how you hear it, understand it and use it in your own life that matters most.

In his book *Conversations with God*, Neale Donald Walsch talks about these concepts as they relate to the “destructive habit” of abuse:

“... [I]f you look to what is best for you in these situations where you are being abused, at the very least what you will do is stop the abuse. And that will be good for both you and the abuser. *For even an abuser is abused when his abuse is allowed to continue.*

This is not healing to the abuser, but damaging. For if the abuser finds that his abuse is acceptable, what has he learned? Yet, if the abuser finds that his abuse will be accepted no more, what has he been allowed to discover?

Therefore, treating others with love does not necessarily mean allowing others to do as they wish.

Parents learn this early with children. Adults are not so quick to learn it with other adults, nor nation with nation. Yet despots cannot be allowed to flourish, but must be stopped in their despotism. Love of Self, *and love of the despot, demands it.* (Note to readers: Dictionary.com defines a *despot* as, among other things, “a tyrant or oppressor.”)

My views are quite similar to Neale’s on this, particularly with respect to his last sentence: “Love of Self, and love of the [other], demands it.” And here’s the way I’d language it to honor my perspective: I believe that unconditional acceptance and love are about honoring both ourselves AND others. It’s giving people full freedom of choice to do what THEY FEEL is “right” for them. It’s also giving ourselves the same permission – to love and accept ourselves, then choose to do what we feel will give us the most lasting peace. This is the foundation of all my work, including family “interventions.”

Recently, I was watching a TV show about dealing with people who have addictions and destructive habits. (It’s called *Intervention*.) Frequently on the show, families try to get someone they care about to go into treatment. However, even if they’re successful at doing this, often the person’s “recovery” doesn’t last. As I watch the show, I’ve come to be able to predict when this is going to happen. And here’s the clue: it’s when the family is trying to force someone into treatment in such a manner that the addict perceives that they really are not being given a choice. The addict will say something like, “I don’t want to go.” And the family says, “No, you have to. It’s for your own good.” Or, “There are going to be serious consequences,” or “you’re going to have to leave if you don’t.”

For me, it always comes back to love and acceptance. When we try to control someone else’s behavior, the way they hear and experience that is: “If you don’t do what we want you to do, we won’t love or accept you.” And in my experience,

I've seen over and over again that this very seldom works – at least not in the long-term.

Now, don't get me wrong: Interventions ARE necessary at times. And many of us DO have situations where we have to deal with someone else's behavior that is negatively impacting our life. But here's where I'd ask a new question: How can we use acceptance, love and choice to honour everyone involved? Here's what that might look like.

“Listen, if you want to use drugs, you have every right to. It's not my business to impose my will on yours. But I also want you to know that I choose not to live with someone who's doing drugs, even if you're my child, husband or wife. I am absolutely committed to that. So if you want to continue doing them, either one of us may need to leave. Or, if you're willing, you could go to treatment, or explore other options that feel right for you. But I really want you to know that I'm not trying to force you into that, because I don't want you to do something you don't want to do because I know ultimately the changes you are forced into making won't last.

I don't believe that any of us has the “right” to change someone else. Whether we are in a marriage or a partnership, or if it's our kids, friends or employees, the other person's choices are ultimately up to them. Yet being in a relationship means that some of their choices may also affect us. So at the same time as I want to give other people love, acceptance and free choice, I can only do so to the extent that I am willing to do give this to myself.

If I perceive that being around someone is provoking suffering in me, even though I know changing my thinking would change how I feel, sometimes that is not realistic, or what your feelings are telling you is supposed to happen. I, and everyone around me, is best served when I make choices that honor myself. And

paradoxically, the actions that I take out of self-love are also the most loving and honoring towards the other person. At least that is what I have experienced.

This might begin by saying, “When you do this or say that, I end up feeling bad. I do not want to control or blame you for anything because I am responsible for how I feel, but I also want to let you know that if you do continue doing what you are doing, then something’s going to change. I won’t be training you that it is OK to treat me this way anymore.” This kind of unconditional acceptance and commitment to your own well-being first is, in my opinion, an essential part of all healthy relationships, AND essential to the process of dealing with someone else’s habits or addictions. And it is not really about dealing with the other persons habits or addictions at all because we can’t. We only have the power to deal with our response to them. It’s not about accepting or loving them OR you — it’s both.

Continually allowing someone to hurt or abuse us is not love. It’s not love for us, and it’s not love for them either. What we’re actually doing is teaching the person that their behavior is permitted and can continue. Therefore we are actually stimulating more of it by continuing to allow it.

Now, some people will take what I’ve just said and use it to control the other person. It might look and sound the same, but inside we will know, and they will too. If our intention is, “I want to control, stop or change you,” then they are going to feel it, no matter what you say. And whatever change they make is not likely going to last, because it wasn’t their honest, authentic choice.

For me, real change doesn’t come out of control. It’s just the opposite. “If you need to continue to do your addiction or habit, I want to respect your choice. The truth is, I don’t have the ability to not allow your choices to impact me the way they do, and I really love you. And I don’t want to ask you to stop just because it is affecting me; but I’m also taking a stand (or making a choice) for my own happiness, which does not include being around this behavior.”

Having said all that, I also need to remind you that this is still not “the truth.” It’s just my own interpretation of what unconditional love and acceptance look like for me, and alternative ways we can treat others and ourselves in these extreme situations.

Honoring ourselves, while at the same time loving and accepting someone else unconditionally – even their desire to do a destructive habit – may sound impossible. And at times it is! I don’t want to minimize that, or the pain you may be experiencing if you’re dealing with that. The question I’d invite you to consider is, “What choice will bring me more peace?” Not just in the moment but over time? What I’ve found, for myself, is that when we make the other person wrong or believe that one of us should change, it generates a lot of conflict between us. However, when I can truly come from love and acceptance – for me and the other person – my language and actions become more focused and clear. I feel stronger about standing up for myself. At the same time, I truly want to support the other person in whatever they choose; and they feel that and hear it in my words and actions.

Perhaps the real challenge is not who will change, but will WE honestly accept ourselves and honor our own choices? That’s something many of us have difficulty with.

I’d like to ask for your help in reducing the shame, loneliness, isolation, guilt and self-hatred, others are facing by joining our [FaceBook Page](#) - or the [Online Community section of the Addiction and Choice website](#).

You can also post comments or questions you have for me personally on our [FaceBook Page](#) , and I’ll respond just as soon as I can.

Thanks so much for considering my request. Love, Scott

The Paradox of Choice...

I believe that the way we choose to interpret the meaning of the events and circumstances in our life is always a choice. Even this belief is an interpretation of the meaning of “choice”. And the choice I want to make is the one that empowers me with the most peace.

When I’m experiencing “negative” circumstances, or people seem to be doing or saying things I don’t want, it often empowers me to see myself as 100% responsible for everything that’s occurring — not because it is “true,” but because that empowers me more than “blaming”. And, sometimes it empowers me more to see myself as a victim. Yeah I know. Sometimes being angry at someone else feels more peaceful than accepting responsibility, and I choose to honor that for myself.

And when I’m talking to someone or working with them I give others the same freedom by accepting their humanity and choice to see themselves as “victims”. While I believe they have the same capacity to choose, they may not be aware of this, not believe it to be true for them in the moment, or just not yet developed the muscle of consciously choosing their thoughts. So when I relate to them, I choose to be responsible for the possibility that my words could impact them potentially even more than their own thoughts and perceptions.

Let me say that again slightly differently. If ultimately what I want to do is make the biggest difference I can in the world, I can’t do that if I see myself as being a victim to the circumstances, people, places or things around me. That perspective doesn’t give me the highest access to peace. That’s why, when I’m working with someone, I am committed to letting go of any disempowering judgment (or expectations) in order to provide as much love and acceptance as I can.

That's the paradox of choice for me. And that too is just a perspective that is not the "Truth"

What I Want For You...

When considering how I most want to treat another person, this is the way I choose to look at things: "I want for you what you want for you."

That might sound like I'm just being nice, or people-pleasing. But I honestly mean it. Even if what you want appears not to be what I want, what I want for you is what you want for you.

When I say this statement to myself, I literally feel better, stronger and peaceful inside. And it truly feels like I'm honoring the other person and myself at the same time. Believing it also helps me go beyond what I think is "best or right" for them, or what I personally want to happen in any situation. Instead, "my interest" becomes unconditionally what the other person wants for themselves. And this is something I also want, and give to myself. I want you to want for me what I want for me and that is therefore what I give to you.

Let's also be real. This doesn't mean I don't have my own wants, hopes or desires. Yes, my humanity might want you to stop smoking, drinking or doing drugs. I might hope that you'll stop being angry or controlling. And I'd certainly desire that we find a way for you to want to live rather than die, to not commit suicide if you're considering that, especially if you're someone who's close to me. And yet, I can still honestly say: "Ultimately, I only want what you want for you."

An extreme example of this was the death of someone close to me named Matt. Matt was like a brother and son to me and he died tragically through a drug overdose at the age of 23. He was someone I deeply loved and I wanted him to live! Yet on another level, my interpretation was that his soul made a choice to leave.

So what's in my "best interests," then? If his soul was really saying, "Scott, I don't want to be here anymore," would I want to have him stay for me, or go for him? My choice came down to what I wanted most for him.

The same thing happened with Gary - another friend who passed away – but this time due to cancer. I felt that he wanted to die, but I also sensed it would be hard for him to say that to those who loved him, since a lot of people have difficulty with death. I wanted him to live too. Yet I also wanted him to know that there's nothing wrong with choosing to die; and that if he chose to, it was what I would want for him. When he died, I was deeply sad that he was no longer here. But I was also at peace with choosing to believe it was what he wanted.

The reason I share these stories in a book about bad habits and addictions is this: I don't want to be attached to, or have expectations about what another person does. Why? Because ultimately I don't know what is in their best interests. Whatever I think is "best" for them is just my viewpoint. I don't *know*. I really don't.

What I want most is what truly serves the other person — whatever they want in their heart of hearts. And, if right now that is doing drugs or getting drunk, over-shopping or working, under-or-over eating or self-harm, then I choose to trust (or choose to think) that that is serving a higher purpose that I am not capable of comprehending. So I want to give them the experience of such love and acceptance that they feel able to choose what they feel is right for them, and feel safe to tell me the truth about it without judgment or negative consequences which include them thinking I will be worrying. Why? Because even my worrying has a negative impact on how they feel.

Yes, I may have feelings to express or ideas to contribute. And when it feels appropriate, I will voice them – not out of need, but from a desire to contribute my full self to others. But I don't want someone to see themselves as bad or

wrong, or take it as a personal rejection if they don't act on it. That's why I choose not to focus on the outcome I want and focus instead on discovering what they really want for themselves.

What helps me have this kind of unconditional acceptance is knowing that I really don't know what's right or best for any human being on earth, including myself. In the grand scheme of things, I don't know why you are here or what you "need" to do for yourself. Therefore I'm not going to tell you that drugs are bad or try to make you stop. For all I know, they may be the only thing that's stopping you from killing yourself or hurting or abusing someone else. I just don't know.

Choosing to believe this makes it much easier for me to accept another person's choices. Are they good or bad? Well, in what context? What about a kid who interprets his father's and mother's behaviors as being abusive, for example? Maybe that son blames his parents for why his life did not turn out the way he wanted, then becomes an addict in response to his interpretations. Maybe that too is not as bad as it sounds. Maybe that kid grows up to start organizations that prevent and solve addiction problems, organizations that touch so many people that the world would have been a worse place had he not had the experience of abuse, created disempowering meanings and subsequently become an addict. I just don't know.

My personal access to unconditional acceptance comes from being willing to be open to the possibility that no matter how much I exercise my power to create and choose meanings, that there may be a greater purpose, benefit or plan in whatever someone (including myself) is doing. That perhaps, in the bigger picture, we're doing it (whatever "it" is) for a reason that serves both us and the planet in a massive way that I am not capable of seeing because I don't have the mindset of God to see it. So judging you or your behavior simply makes no sense to me. And I fully acknowledge that everything I just said is an interpretation I created of "the meaning of meaning" which includes my belief in God.

I Want This for Myself

The reason I've chosen this approach is, first: It works. It actually does help people reduce or end their unwanted habits; but more importantly, I find it gives them the highest success in not having to substitute one bad habit and addiction with another. And second, because it's also what I want for myself.

Just like any child, there were many times that I felt I wasn't being accepted and loved. When my father said things or my mother did things, or when my classmates or teachers acted in certain ways, I interpreted these events to mean that I wasn't accepted for who I was, that my choices, feelings and needs weren't important, and consequently experienced a lot of pain. This was not my parents fault and this is not what they intended. I made it up. I didn't know then that I had the power to choose and interpret meanings. So I got trapped in my own negative thinking habits, which led to my bad habits and addictions.

To this day, I still hate being controlled by people. I dislike being told what to do or having people give me advice when I don't ask for it. Since I don't like being treated this way, I am very good at not giving advice or controlling people. I am committed to giving people what I want for myself. I want the freedom to be responsible for my life, as well as be an angry victim — in other words, to be a human being, with all of what that means for me.

That said, I also love having the freedom to be honest and direct with people and having friends who accept that. It feels great to say what's on my mind and speak my truth without being judged or judging myself for it. There's peace in that. And I guess that's ultimately what it comes down to. When I feel that people accept me for both who I am and for who I'm not, I can be myself — and I experience peace. But when I sense that people are trying to fix me or change me, I feel restless, angry and judged.

If you've ever been around someone who's constantly worrying about you or wanting you to change, you'll know what I mean: It feels awful. You don't feel safe to be yourself, to tell them your truth or to say what's really going on – because if you do, they're going to worry or be upset. They don't really want to hear it, so you don't really want to share it. And you tend not to give that to yourself, either. So instead of coming from acceptance and love, you end up making choices out of fear. And that just adds to the cycle I described earlier, where our negative thoughts and feelings fuel our negative habits and behaviors.

Restless, Irritable, Discontented... and Our Search for Peace

I'd like to go back briefly to the 12 steps and the big book of *Alcoholics Anonymous*. (So pardon me if this Addiction model, or language doesn't fit for you.) In that book, there's one very small section that I used to teach people so often that it became a thinking habit of mine. And while it deals with addiction, it also seems to apply to everyone I've ever worked with — so perhaps it's just part of being human – or, maybe we are all addicts. I don't know.

In *Alcoholics Anonymous* it says that alcoholics are “restless, irritable and discontented unless they can experience the sense of ease and comfort, which comes at once by taking a few drinks.” That phrase stayed with me all these years. And at some point I started asking myself: “What are the common problems, the things that everyone I've worked with said was true for them?” Whenever I took someone through that section of the book, people agreed with it. Regardless of what their behavior was, they said that they felt that way (or words to that effect) before and after doing their addiction or habit, and they felt some ease, peace or comfort while doing it.

So what are people really looking for, I wondered: Feelings of ease and comfort? And what about “restless, irritable and discontented?” Are those the feelings that are driving them to make themselves feel better in whatever way they can?

And that was the clue. What came to me was this: We do things we don't really want to, even when they hurt us, because of how “restless, irritable and discontented” we feel; and what we are really seeking is some kind of comfort and peace. Our addictive behaviors and habits have become our “survival” way of getting these feelings. But instead of using our addictions and unwanted habits, what if we find a different way to generate those feelings of peace inside? For me, that different way requires me to break through my addiction to ease and comfort. What do I mean? Every day I get on the treadmill (98%) and run or walk 10km. It's not peaceful and I don't look forward to it. So why do I do it? Because I experience peace more abundantly during the day compared to if I don't do it. It's the same reason why I drink between 3 and 6 litres of water every day. Do I like water? NO. But I experience more peace when I drink the water that is not comfortable to drink.

All my work has come out of my obsessive search for the answer to the question, “What could be causing our feelings?” If we could find out what causes these uncomfortable feelings as well as what alleviates them, and also, what both have in common, we might have something that could work for anyone. That's why the Cognitive Behavior Therapy, and Law of Attraction viewpoint that “thoughts cause feelings” resonated for me, and led me to create the programs, and do all the work I'm now doing. I was taught to honor my word and not my feelings. I choose something different now. I honor my feelings first, so I can honor my word authentically.

Now let me get back to the connection between thought and feelings. What kind of thinking results in me feeling discontented inside? Well, it's when I'm judging someone else or judging myself. When I don't unconditionally accept someone.

When I think they should be doing something they're not (and that includes me). Or when I'm focused on what I want for myself, but not for others. All of these result in me feeling irritable or discontented inside. And that's the opposite of peace and I choose peace.

I recently saw some old friends from my "recovery" years, a time when we used to take addicts page-by-page through the Big Book. We were passionate in those days and "knew" that what we were doing was "right" and the most effective way to recover and help others. What I discovered when I met with them is that some of them haven't changed — they still believe in their "truth." When I listened to them talk, I just smiled. I honestly felt no desire to try to correct or change them by saying, "Look, you guys, here's where I am. I've got this better way now ..." I didn't feel the need to say that, because my way is not better. It is just an interpretation that is not the "Truth". But perhaps more importantly, that would have been making them wrong, which makes me (and probably them) restless rather than peaceful.

And it's so easy to do, right? When we want to find the right answer or a better way, we start trying to convince other people that we have it. Subtly, we start thinking that we're in a superior place. "But wait, you don't understand. This way is even better. Let me teach you about my more peaceful way." It's well meaning; but it just leads me back to the same old place of not being peaceful — and not everybody is committed to peace so I need to have the humility to respect that. And "peace" is not a superior feeling or emotion. It is just what I am committed to for me.

So once again, it's paradoxical. Yes, I absolutely want to share my insights with people. But doing so is actually hurtful, if I want to correct them or get attached to them "getting" it. The best way I can be peaceful is by accepting people where they are. If someone wants help or to discuss new approaches, I'd be happy to

share. But I don't want to change them. Just being with people, where they are, with whatever they believe, has become more peaceful now for me, and them.

Since I mentioned the 12 steps and Alcoholics Anonymous, I'd like to quote from their basic text on the subject of "acceptance." It's from Page 449 in the first 3 editions, pg. 417 in the 4th edition of *Alcoholics Anonymous* or [The Big Book](#) as it is widely known:

"And acceptance is the answer to all my problems today. When I am disturbed, it is because I find some person, place, thing or situation – some fact of my life – unacceptable to me, and I can find no serenity until I accept that person, place, thing or situation as being exactly the way it is supposed to be at this moment.

Nothing, absolutely nothing happens in God's world by mistake. Until I could accept my alcoholism, I could not stay sober; unless I accept life completely on life's terms, I cannot be happy. I need to concentrate not so much on what needs to be changed in the world as on what needs to be changed in me and in my attitudes."

So here is my current process for making choices. I may think I see the logic, value or need for something; but if I don't feel peaceful inside, I don't trust my thinking. I don't have to understand why. All I know is that I am committed to being peaceful, and trust that if the thoughts I'm thinking, or the choices I am considering making are perceived by me as resulting in me feeling more peaceful than the other options I may be considering, I go with peace. And sometimes it is not black and white. Sometimes there are a few options that I am considering, and one of those options is not peaceful, but it's at least more peaceful than all the others I am capable of seeing, so once again, I move in the direction of greatest peace.

If you want to try this out, begin watching what brings you closest to that internal sense of peace. Certain thoughts, words and actions drive peace, and certain thoughts, words and actions take it away. I'm not saying that they're the same ones for everyone. And whether you call it "peace" or something else doesn't matter — it's the feeling you get inside that you are committed to. For me, I used to get fooled by "excitement." Excitement feels good, but it is not what I am talking about — and I have found that choices I make from based on being excited, more often than not, lead to problems for me and others.

So that's what is "driving" me these days: My feelings. I honor myself by honoring my feelings. And I honor my commitments, promise and my word effortlessly because I am in the habit of not making promises without feeling, and discerning peace first. Whether it's deciding to run, to coach someone, to enter a new partnership or to change a previous commitment, whatever I feel will give me the most potent, lasting experience of peace is what I try and follow.

The Power of Choice Habit Mastery Principles

Everything you have read so far has been adapted from another book I wrote called "The Power of Choice Habit Mastery Principles" — A book I wrote and which all the programs I deliver are founded upon — a foundation which creates an atmosphere of acceptance, where people support one another in developing the mental muscle of habitually choosing our thoughts, words, and interpretations, as well as mastering the habit of honoring our words, commitments and promises.

The "Power of Choice Habit Mastery Principles" are founded on the belief that it is our thought and behavioral habits (both conscious and unconscious) that are the cause of our unwanted and wanted experiences in life — that our "choice muscles" have been severely weakened over the years. We've unknowingly given away our power so often that "feeling better" has become our number one obsession. We've become numb and blind to who we really are and what we

“truly want”. We’ve lost touch with our authentic selves. We live to survive and hold on to anything that gives us instant gratification. Little by little, we engage in our unwanted habits more and more. Eventually we become addicted to them, knowingly or not. Kind of like the frog in the pot story that you’ve probably heard about but as a reminder, goes something like this.

If you drop a frog in a pot of boiling water, it will frantically try to clamber out. But if you place it gently in a pot of room temperature water and turn the heat on low, it will float there calmly. As the water gradually heats up, the frog will sink into a tranquil stupor, exactly like one of us in a hot bath, and before long, it will unresistingly allow itself to be boiled to death.

Fortunately for us, unlike the frog, we are self-aware. Our past choices and habits were a logical outcome of the things we experienced in the past, based on our consciousness at that time. But now we can choose something different. Rather than continuing to give power to past events, circumstances or other people as being the “cause” of our problems or success in life, the “Power of Choice Habit Mastery Principles” are a choice to put responsibility and power squarely in our own hands if we want to. I believe it’s our habitual thought, talk and behavioral choices that shape and determines our future.

“We shape our lives. We shape ourselves. The choices we make are ultimately our own responsibility” Eleanor Roosevelt.

The Power of Choice Habit Mastery Principles rest on the belief that each of us has the capacity to reclaim our power – to think, believe, feel, be, have and do - to virtually create anything we want in life, whether it's breaking free of unwanted habits or addictions, overcoming personal challenges, or accomplishing something that others say is “impossible.” If one person can accomplish it, it’s available to all of us. And if one person did it, so can WE.

“Your time is limited. So don’t waste it living someone else’s life. Don’t be trapped by dogma – which is living with the results of other people’s thinking. Don’t let the noise of others’ opinions, drown out your own inner voice. And most important,

have the courage to follow your heart and intuition. They somehow already know what you want to become. Everything else is secondary.” Steve Jobs 1955-2011.

Having Authentic Choice...

To recap. Whatever our addictions are or how serious we believe them to be, although I am not an addictions or medical expert of any sort, from the Power of Choice Habit Mastery Perspective, I choose to believe there is nothing wrong with you or what you are doing. My intention is never to convince you to change, because why would I if there is nothing wrong with you?!! And besides, the choice to change has to be 100 per cent your own. In other words, I am committed that you authentically choose for yourself – or not.

For me, “authentic choice” means that nobody is trying to make us do anything. There’s no pressure, force, guilt, manipulation or intimidation behind it. Thus, when we say “I want to change,” it comes honestly from within us.

When we look at our addictions this way, we come to see that they were probably quite satisfying and served us at one time, perhaps even for many years, but if they are no longer serving us and we want to make a different choice, then of course it’s possible. And it’s from this place of emotional freedom, willingness and desire that we can authentically choose what’s right for us.

Making ourselves wrong all the time simply perpetuates the problem and keeps us stuck. No one can choose freely from here. It’s when we can see that nothing’s wrong, and there’s no judgment or guilt about having to change, that The Power of Choice becomes available to us.

The Power of Choice Habit Mastery Success Programs

I'd like to share the key distinctions that are common among all the different Power of Choice Habit Mastery Success Programs I've created - as well as some of the practical steps we use, so you can use them too!

Our programs are designed to encourage people to make free choices for themselves, choices about whether or not to participate, what new positive habits they will try out, how much they'll do on a daily basis. And it's about creating customized structures that support them in keeping their commitments. There's no attempt to get people to do things they don't want to, and no criticism or guilt if they don't follow through. However, it is also about learning how they feel when they do or don't keep their commitments, do their new habits, and make new choices to feel better about themselves.

In all of our programs, participants are given simple activities and positive behaviors to consider implementing to build up their "muscles of choice." These may include things like drinking water, doing exercises and taking new steps to do things that are important to them and yet they have been putting off — but all in ridiculously small amounts. This is to avoid the normal pressures we put on ourselves to make immediate changes or to set huge and unattainable goals that set us up for failure. The point is to set everyone up to succeed.

Other elements of our programs include: training ourselves to develop the habit of seeing "what's right-good-positive" in others instead of "what's wrong-bad-negative;" creating new meanings for past events in our lives; making amends or apologies to those we may have hurt or let down; having daily contact with a buddy (or team of buddies); and keeping daily commitments to ourselves. (I've given a more detailed list below.)

However, it's not these activities themselves that are the most important. It's the internal good feelings — like confidence, self-acceptance and strength — that people start to experience as a result of doing them. These more positive

thoughts and feelings begin to replace the old (but previously persistent) negative thoughts and feelings which may have been driving their unproductive and unwanted behaviors.

Part of the reason I use the phrase “power of choice” is because, almost by definition, addictions and unwanted behaviors are about the experience of having *seemingly* little or no choice. The Power of Choice Habit Mastery principles are about empowering people to see and experience for themselves the areas of their lives where they really DO have choice. And engaging in those choices facilitates a shift towards more positive thinking, feeling and behavior. In fact, for some, the creation and development of certain positive habits results in the “accidental” disappearance of their “addiction.”

Here are some of the core ideas and steps used in The Power of Choice Habit Mastery programs that help create this shift:

- 1) Giving people the freedom to choose what’s authentically right for them by not trying to manipulate or control them into changing their behaviors.
- 2) Considering the perspective that thoughts drive feelings - and that negative thinking and feeling influence us to engage in negative behaviors.
- 3) Redirecting our thinking when our mind tells us that there is something wrong with us (or others), that we are not enough or need to be perfect and that there is something that needs to be fixed or changed.
- 4) Transforming our way of thinking (and the language we use) about addictive behaviors and unwanted habits by not judging them, seeing them as “wrong or bad,” or seeing others as “broken,” or “needing to be fixed.”
- 5) Giving unconditional acceptance and love to others, and ourselves by choosing to see people as “right, whole and perfect.”

- 6) Creating structures that honor and support us in developing new behaviors and habits of thinking that make us feel better about ourselves and that enable us to enjoy life more fully.
- 7) Developing and mastering the habit of choosing our perceptions and being responsible for them; choosing to interpret our life experiences in ways that empower ourselves and others.
- 8) Choosing thoughts that move us beyond the need to fight our unwanted habits & addictions; allowing our new habits of thought, talk and action to release, redirect and replace our old patterns and behaviors.
- 9) Seeing our unwanted habits/addictions as a gift, an opportunity to re-evaluate our lives and choose differently (if we wish)
- 10) Developing our sense of personal integrity, both in relation to ourselves and with others; as a way of bringing us more peace and contentment; moving towards our truth — who we want to be and how we want to live.
- 11) Moving beyond conflicts about “who’s right and who’s wrong” and ceasing to try to prove that our definitions or interpretations or solutions are the best ones (which is simply another disguised form of negative thinking).
- 12) Finding and creating new habits that help us prevent, reduce and replace any and all unwanted patterns, whether we label them as addictions or not.

Transforming Addictions: A Summary

When I began writing this book, my mission was to transform “addictions.” By that I mean anything we are doing, any behavior we’re engaged in that’s brought us to say, “I just don’t want to do this anymore. It’s having a negative impact on my life and I’m committed to something different.” Yet despite those thoughts and feelings, we can’t seem to stop, stay stopped or really break free of this thing, no matter how committed we are.

Then at some point along the way, I realized that I was out of alignment with my commitment to be of maximum service to the planet (modified from the big book of AA which says “our real purpose is to be of maximum service to God and the people about us). My focus couldn’t just be about addictions anymore — it had to include transforming the way we think about and deal with ANY unwanted destructive circumstance or self-limiting behavior, whatever we want to call it. It’s not the compulsion, addiction, circumstance, or behavior that’s important to me, because I see those as symptoms of something deeper. It’s about discovering the barriers in all of us, that’s causing us to feel pain, or being stopped from living a great life.

That’s why I don’t want to label or judge people, to categorize or put you in a box through the language I use. It’s because I don’t want to risk further fueling that pain inside. Instead, I want you to know that I really and truly accept you, whether you’re watching video games or are into self-harm or suicidal behaviors; whether you’re compulsively eating fast food, addicted to abusing others, or smoking crack. If YOU are feeling like you want or need support in stopping or changing something that doesn’t feel good to you, that’s where I want to support you.

I approach everyone in essentially the same way. I start with love and acceptance. I see what you’re doing as a successful, creative way of getting out of or relieving

whatever pain or discomfort you're feeling inside, knowing that it's the best way you know to survive, cope, or feel good about your life.

On a more global level, I believe that, ultimately, the way we will know we have transformed addictions on this planet – is when the word “addiction” no longer even exists in our vocabulary. But right now it does, so hopefully I've done my little part to help move the word out of our vocabulary by demonstrating through the various different addictions experts that contradict one another, that the word itself has no agreed upon meaning – and therefore the word “addiction” has very little meaning – other than the meaning you give it of course. 😊 If you are questioning whether we've all got them or no one's got them?, rest assured you are not alone for there are many others (experts included) asking the same question. One place we can start though, is by transforming our thinking.

Our judgments. Seeing ourselves and others as victims. Blaming others and criticizing ourselves. Be willing to look for the common elements among all such behaviors, whether it's drinking alcohol or using crack cocaine, smoking, self-harm, gambling, sex, overeating, being co-dependent, abusing or controlling others, or even excessive worrying, blaming and complaining.

So what's common to all of these? It's being engaged in a behavior that we want to stop, reduce or control and feel we can't. Stuck. Unable to change. As I've said, I want to make sure that nobody gets left behind. They may have an “actual” addiction or not, depending how you define it. But it's how they feel that matters most. This applies to any kind of habit, pattern, compulsion or addiction.

What's more, it applies to all our other life circumstances, habits and behaviors as well. Maybe you don't feel hopeless, but you've just given up trying to change whatever habit you have. Or maybe you know you could change if you REALLY wanted to, but you haven't been able to find the motivation or the right methodology for you. Why would I not want to help you, too?

What if someone is not feeling hopeless, but just feeling stuck in a behavior? Continually on the internet or watching TV. Going out shopping so they can feel the rush. Going out for fast food because it's easy and they don't have to think about anything else. Feeling unfulfilled in the relationship they're in. Doing unproductive or time-wasting behaviors at work. Even blocked in expressing themselves or their creativity. Or having any life circumstance or doing anything that they feel is negatively impacting their life – at home, at work, at school, wherever – and wanting a change for something better and feeling it's just not possible.

We all make choices that are unfulfilling or unproductive. Choices that are not creating what we really want to be, do, or have - or that don't meet our soul's desire for our life. And because of it, we're feeling discomfort inside. An inner pain, irritability, restlessness or discontentment that we deal with by turning to foods, various substances and a multitude of negative thinking patterns and behaviors in an attempt to make ourselves feel better, or keep us mindless of how we actually feel. They might even involve pain – like something that seems extreme (but not to me) like the cutting I mentioned earlier – but for a time they quiet the negative voice and feelings inside.

When Comfort Replaces Fulfillment...

For some of us, addictions are those habits that we've kept doing over time that have replaced fulfillment with momentary comfort. Our body's biology and chemistry have adapted to and become dependent on them. And so has our thinking - addictive thinking that is going on right now that we might not even be aware of. These habits are causing us to feel bad, which leads us to choose substances and behaviors that are not fulfilling and probably destructive, and we've grown to numb to care.

The more negative our thinking and feeling, the more these behaviors become locked in. So we bully others because we're actually afraid or scared of others inside. We keep working at mindless jobs or jobs we hate because we don't believe we can really do what we want to and get paid for it. We get drunk because we don't want to face the pain of a bad marriage or cruelty at home, or the regrets of what we did to our kids. Or we get hooked on the thrill of a substance like paint and varnish remover, as I did at the age of 10 because I was feeling lonely and an outcast in my family and at school.

For me – and let me reiterate that this is just my perspective, not “the truth” – addictions are one of a series or spectrum of behaviors that come from living unfulfilled lives; from living a life out of integrity with our own principles, values and truth, disconnected from our own love or inner truth, our source or that which some call God; or from living with resentment, anger, pain, fear judgment or hopelessness inside.

We're not being true to ourselves. And to avoid being present to that, we run away and try to escape. We use whatever substances, people and behaviors we can to make ourselves feel better even if for just one moment. But these also give us negative consequences – some severe enough that society calls them addictions; others are less so and we call them something else, like habits. But it's the root issues behind these behaviors that have come to interest me most.

That's why I'm not out to “treat” the addiction or the behavior. If you feel that anything you are doing is hurting your life or holding you back, I want to support you in discovering the choices, habits and replacement behaviors that can help you for two reasons: First, so that you don't have to keep living with the negative thoughts and feelings about whatever you are doing; and second, so you can begin to create your life – one small step at a time – and feel better about yourself, have more self-confidence and self-esteem and begin to do the things that you most want to do.

By moving in the direction of a life you truly want, I believe, based on my own experience, that you will leave your distractions, pain/discomfort-relieving habits and your avoidance behaviors behind because you don't need them any longer to make you feel better. But again, that's only if you want to. It's not that anything you're doing is wrong. You don't need to change to make someone else happier. It really is up to you. We all change when we are ready to - and no one has the right to control you - or me!

What I've found is that, by addressing these issues, many different kinds of unwanted behaviors can be overcome. I've seen this with my own numerous unwanted habits and addictions; I've seen it in the school kids, teachers, multi-millionaires, homeless, and business people I've coached, as well as in people of all ages who I've worked with one-to-one, or in family situations; I've seen it in First Nations, Inuit, Native circles, with evangelical Christian believers; and I've seen it with people of no particular faith and from many different cultural backgrounds.

And that's why I've written this book. Not to try and convince you that I have the "answer" or the "truth," because I don't - but because I wanted to share with you what I've been learning and discovering about habits, patterns, addictions and choice.

The Power of Choice Habit Mastery Principles

Putting it in the language I used earlier, these principles are not about "solving the original cause" of our addictions, whatever that may have been. It's about releasing and replacing old patterns with new and more empowering habits of thought, speech and behavior. It's also about shifting the old "negative" ways of thinking that have created our negative feelings and which in turn are driving our behaviors and addictions right now.

Fundamentally, The Power of Choice Habit Mastery programs are about encouraging people to make free and authentic choices, choices that make them feel better, stronger and more confident about themselves. It's about helping them grow and develop empowering habits and take steps towards living a life they love. And it's about giving them the experience of having their "unproductive habits" decline and be replaced with the positive habits that they have created, enabling them to get the "ease, comfort and peace" they seek from within themselves. *The Power of Choice Habit Mastery Programs* are simply something I created to facilitate this shift in thinking, feeling and behavior. The process is always changing, and is always being improved upon, because that's the way life grows.

Unconditional acceptance and love are fundamental to all of our programs. As I've intentionally emphasized many times before, they are essential for giving people access or permission to change their behavior and life circumstances, if and when they should authentically choose. The Power of Choice Habit Mastery Program activities themselves are customized, and are simply a way of delivering the experience of love and acceptance, giving people the direct experience of creating new habits (if they choose) that result in them feeling empowered.

More Words on Love and Acceptance

My belief is that when the experience of unconditional love and acceptance is not present, destructive habits and addictions develop as a substitute, escape or avoidance mechanism. Conversely, when they ARE present, people have more choices available to them because they feel able to honestly choose what feels right for them. That's what I mean when I say "Power of Choice."

Most of us, when wanting to deal with our unwanted habits and addictions focus on techniques or activities. These are part of what The Power of Choice Habit

Mastery programs provide. However, I believe that such techniques will only work to the degree that unconditional acceptance and love are at the heart of it. You might say that they are “love and acceptance in action” — a method for growing new habits of thinking, speaking, and behavior based on the experience of unconditional love and acceptance.

And it all begins with listening. That’s what I do when I sit down with someone who has a habit or addiction they want help with. I don’t start with a program, a technique or an approach. I see them as perfect, whole and complete. I look for what’s right. And I listen, with no agenda other than that love be present.

Recently I came across an email that I had sent myself that had been sitting in my “Inbox” for close to a year. It was a piece of writing by Dr. Lee Jampolsky that I had found on the internet somewhere, and it described what I’m talking about in a simple but eloquent way:

What did you want most as a child? To be loved? And what could most effectively communicate that you were loved? Was it not to be listened to with interest and caring? Though the world might seem much more complicated as an adult, nothing has changed in terms of your most basic needs. There is no greater gift you can give a person than listening to them.

Despite popular opinion, the goal of listening is not to figure out how the other person is wrong and how you can make them see it your way. Nor is it to figure out what the problem is and fix it. The goal of authentic listening is to love.

Try a little experiment. Instead of taking some physical action, focus on actively listening more. Active listening means that you listen to other people with the full intention of understanding them. For this experiment, let go of any criticism you might have of the other person. Don't try to figure out any solutions to what they are saying. Simply listen.

This is the way I work with people. Because what I've found is that this gives opens the door for them discovering for themselves what to do. Deeply listening without judgment helps me to hear people's thoughts and feelings, their language and beliefs. It opens up my logic and intuition to what approach may be of maximum service to this person, and how to speak about it in the way that they will hear it.

These insights about acceptance and love have changed the way I serve people. And they've helped me to see that it really isn't about techniques, clients or programs — it's about giving and sharing love as human beings on a deep level.

For me, that's what truly transforms unwanted circumstances, patterns, habits, behaviors, compulsions and addictions of every kind – and any thing else for that matter!

Ya know that Beatles tune "All we need is Love"? I sometimes sing that song but replace the words to "All there is is Love"!!

That is where I'd like to ask for your help in bringing love to help reduce the shame, loneliness, isolation, guilt and self-hatred, others are facing by joining, and yes, bring your love to the [Addiction & Choice FaceBook Page](#) You can also post comments or questions you have for me personally, and I'll respond just as soon as I can.

Thanks so much for considering my request. You have deeply humbled me - and honored me with the time you have invested in reading my message. Thank you for that. Love, Scott