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Self-Control in an Addictive World

by Melanie Wilson, Ph.D.

Carol cashes out her last savings and heads to the pokies room. She's sure the odds are in her favour because she lost money the last few trips. She's tired of the debt collectors hassling her and is looking forward to a big win.

Mike logs on to his computer wondering who he'll meet tonight. He doesn't go out anymore. He doesn't need to. There is always someone online who is eager to meet his needs, no strings attached.

Linda sits down at the kitchen table with a full container of ice cream, though she knows she isn't hungry. She feels sick after eating the rest of the chocolate chip cookies, but she just can't stop.

Carol, Mike and Linda, like millions of us, struggle to find self-control in this addictive world.

- About 1 in 10 Australians are daily smokers.
- About 1 in 3 Australian adults are obese.
- About 1 in 10 Australians have an alcohol addiction.
- About 1 in 6 Australians have a drug addiction.
- About 1 in 100 is a problem gambler.
- Research is being conducted on the effects of compulsive internet use.

Addiction may be our greatest mental, physical, financial and spiritual challenge. When you cannot find self-control, you cannot experience the joy-filled life you want. If you are having difficulty controlling your behaviour, you may have some questions

- How do I know if I have an addiction?
- What causes lack of self-control?
- How can I change my behaviour?
- How can I help my loved one find self-control?

This booklet is designed to answer these and other questions and give you hope for a life that is addiction-free.

How Do I Know if I Have an Addiction?

Most of us recognise ways we struggle with self-control. Perhaps you eat a little more, spend a little more or lose your temper a little more often than you should. But when does a little too much become a serious problem? There are several addiction myths that can be confusing.

Myth #1: People like me don't become addicted.

When you hear the word, 'addict', you may think of the stereotypical drunk asleep on the street or the junkie who sells drugs to pay for the next fix. You may have a hard time imagining a woman as a sexual addict or a grandparent as a compulsive gambler. The traditional belief was that addiction was rare and caused by weak moral character. We liked to think that addicts didn't live where we lived, think like we thought or behave the way we behaved. When the telltale signs of addiction did appear, the problem was often hidden or excused (e.g., 'He needs to drink to calm his nerves'). When that didn't work, the troubled family member was usually made an outcast.

For many years, it was not understood that substance abuse and other forms of dependence do not happen only to other people. Addiction is an equal opportunity destroyer. Men and women of all ages, races, faiths, education levels and financial means lose self-control. In 1995, experts reported that 'the typical alcoholic is in his middle thirties and has a good job, home, and family. Less than 5 percent of alcoholics are on Skid Row' (*Essential Psychopathology and Its Treatment*, p. 144). People like Carol, Mike, Linda — people like us — become addicted every day.

Myth #2: I'm not responsible for my addiction. It's a disease.

A second reason we think we're not addicted is that we don't really know what addiction is. Modern-day thinking has not made the issue any clearer. We have an I-can't-help-myself explanation for everything from obesity to adultery to murder. The idea that addiction is a disease with no cure conflicts with the fact that millions have overcome their destructive habits. The truth, as you will learn, lies somewhere between the traditional 'it's-all-my-fault' mentality and today's 'don't-blame-me' philosophy.

Myth #3: Addiction means drinking or using drugs every day.

Addiction is an unhealthy dependence on something or someone. We often think of addiction as limited to drug and alcohol use, but you can become dependent on many other things, people and behaviours. You can become dependent upon approval, gossip, sports, the stock market or sunbathing, to name just a few. Sometimes we think a behaviour problem means extremes like daily drunkenness and bankruptcy. Although dependence includes these extremes, it also includes other seemingly harmless behaviours: being unable to stop eating when you're satisfied, spending a few dollars on lottery tickets every week, wanting one more date in an unhealthy relationship, skipping a holiday to get more work done. You can develop many kinds of problem behaviours that may or may not affect you every day.

Everyone has bad habits, but most are not severe enough to be diagnosed as dependence by a health professional. An addiction is a habit that you cannot give up on your own. Signs of addiction include the following:

- **Tolerance** – a need for more of something to get the same pleasurable effect.
- **Withdrawal** – physical and emotional difficulties when something is taken away.
- **Loss of control** – something being used in greater amounts or for longer than planned; inability to stop using something.

- **Decreased quality of life** – getting and using something replaces more important activities; use of something continues even though it causes physical, emotional, occupational or social problems.

If you decide that you need medical or mental health care, a psychologist, psychiatrist or physician will determine if you have a disorder that can be diagnosed. A medical diagnosis is often necessary to obtain treatment, but if you suspect you have an addiction, you probably do. Insert your problem behaviour into the blanks below to help determine if you have a problem with self-control.

1. **Have you ever felt you should cut down on** _____?
2. **Have other people annoyed you by criticising your** _____?
3. **Have you ever felt guilty about** _____?
4. **Do you feel you could never have enough** _____?
5. **Do you feel depressed or anxious when you go without** _____?
6. **Have you tried to hide your** _____?
7. **Do you try to convince yourself you don't have a problem with** _____?
8. **Does the time you spend** _____ **interfere with important life activities?**
9. **Does your** _____ **make a physical, social, emotional or job problem worse?**

The more 'yes' answers you have, the greater the possibility that you have an addiction.

What Causes Lack of Self-Control?

Recognising what causes a lack of self-control will determine the right cure.

Myth #4: Addiction is simply a lack of willpower.

Most people have heard of Noah and the ark, but may not have heard about his lack of control with alcohol. Remember the story? God flooded the entire earth with rain for 40 days and nights, but God chose to save Noah and his family. According to God's instructions, they built an enormous ark to hold two of every kind of animal on the earth. Then they waited inside the ark for more than a year while the earth was covered with water and dried out again. All that time, Noah trusted God's promise to save them. Noah certainly didn't lack willpower or determination (Genesis 6:5-8:13).

But one day after the flood Noah got drunk on wine. He passed out naked in his tent and was disgraced when his son saw him lying there (Genesis 9:20-25). How could a man with such willpower and determination lose self-control? There are physical, environmental and spiritual explanations.

Scientists are beginning to discover changes in the brain that help to explain physical addiction. Dopamine is a pleasure-producing chemical that is normally present in the brain. When you get excited watching your team win a game, dopamine is probably involved. Someone who uses cocaine to feel good floods his brain with too much of a dopamine-like substance. To protect itself, the brain becomes less responsive to dopamine and less able to feel the pleasure of an exciting game. Drug use continues because without the drug the addict cannot feel good and will begin to feel very bad. There is evidence that the same cycle occurs with other types of addiction such as Linda's overeating and Carol's gambling.

Researchers also believe that some people have genes that make addiction more likely. Some people may have lower levels of dopamine and other pleasure-producing chemicals in their brains. Or their brains may not respond as well as they should to these chemicals. Individuals who have a reduced ability to feel pleasure (and possibly pain) may be more likely to return to the high levels of pleasure found in alcohol, drugs, gambling, food and sex.

Myth #5: I'm safe because I don't have a family history of addiction.

Human beings learn a lot by watching others. Because our parents are our primary role models, we learn the most about self-control by watching them. If your parents used a substance, relationship or behaviour without self-control, your risk of a similar addiction is increased. If you watched your mother overspend when she felt down, it's more likely that you'll overspend, too. If you saw your father work long hours and neglect his family, you are more likely to make the same choices. Sometimes parents even reward their children's imitation of their addiction. Mum may enjoy having a shopping buddy and dad may be proud that you work so hard.

The behaviour you can't control may also have been encouraged by other people. Peer pressure is a major factor in alcohol, drug and tobacco use among teenagers. We are social beings with a strong desire to fit in. Mike meets people online with the same problems he has, and participating in a shared addiction helps him feel like he fits in.

The form our addictions take is also influenced by our culture. Noah probably witnessed drunkenness many times in his day. Western culture values hard work, and workaholicism is practically encouraged. Milder forms of alcoholism (weekend drunks) are also largely accepted. Because our nation's wealth has made alcohol, drugs, tobacco, food, shopping, computers and gambling more accessible to us, we may be more likely to suffer these addictions than people in poorer countries.

The addictive cycle frequently starts when you experience stress. Perhaps Noah's drunkenness was triggered by the stresses of seeing every living thing not on the ark die and of spending so many uncertain months on the ark. Trauma, divorce, job loss, the death of a loved one, financial problems, chronic illness and other stressors are often the beginning of an addiction.

Myth #6: My behaviour doesn't hurt anybody but me.

When you hurt yourself, you also hurt those you love. Whether a bad habit leads to divorce, bankruptcy, legal problems, children imitating the habit or just embarrassment, your behaviour affects people in ways you can only imagine. You may be convinced that no one will ever find out about your compulsion. But as you become bolder in pursuit of more drugs, more pornography, more shopping or more of whatever controls you to get the same good feelings—your loved ones are bound to discover your habit. The sooner you admit the problem and ask for help, the less likely it is that you will destroy the relationships that matter most to you.

Even if no one on earth were to discover your addiction, God knows. God has commanded you not to have any other gods before him and not to make idols (Exodus 20:3-4). In biblical times, it was common practice to pray to gods made of wood or stone, asking for help. That may seem silly to us today, but we have our own idols. We trust money to make us feel secure. We depend on sex and relationships to make us feel loved. We think success will give us self-esteem. Instead of going to God first, we go to God only when (and if) we realise those false gods cannot help us.

When you pray to your false god by going to the pokies app, using pornography or overeating, you hurt God. '... I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God,' he says (Exodus 20:5b). God wants to be first in your heart. But when you seek fulfilment in something else, He allows you to discover the inevitable unhappiness. No matter how much money, sex, food or success you have, it will never be enough to satisfy you. God created you with a longing for him, and try as you may to fulfil it with things of this world, you will never be satisfied. Does the substance or behaviour you love so much really make you happy? Or do you find yourself feeling more and more depressed? Unlike a false god, the one true God can meet all of your needs.

Myth #7: I am in so deep, not even God can help me.

The good news is you have an awesome, powerful God who can free you from the slavery of addiction. The bad news is you also have an enemy, Satan, who will tell you that you are hopeless. Satan's goal is to keep you from knowing and loving God. Keeping you in bondage to your false god serves his purposes. You may have heard Satan tell you:

- God can help some people, but you're not one of them;
- if you just try hard enough, you can give this up on your own;
- you just haven't found the right pill, self-help book, mentor or program;
- a little bit of _____ isn't going to hurt;
- go on ... you've had a hard day. You deserve it;
- you can give it up next week.

Linda realised that Satan was speaking to her a lot. He told her she could lose weight if she just tried harder, that she could stop overeating if she found the money for that new diet pill, that she had earned dessert after that difficult day. Linda believed she was hopeless. Then she started listening to God's voice. God promised that he would make a way for her to resist temptation. God told her that he was the only way she could find self-control. God reassured her that there was hope for a better life.

Having an enemy means that becoming addiction-free isn't easy. Yet having a mighty God who loves and cares for you means that you have everything you need to achieve self-control.

How Can I Change My Behaviour?

These days it seems everyone has a different opinion about the best way to make changes. You will always be given new 'solutions' that promise a quick and easy fix, like popular diets and diet supplements that are here today and gone tomorrow. You need a long-term solution.

Myth #8: I don't need any help to overcome my addiction.

Long-time members of twelve-step groups tell those who believe they can kick their habit alone to go ahead and try. For these veterans, a successful recovery has meant admitting they cannot do it alone. In fact, the first step toward freedom is accepting you are powerless over the drug, the gambling, the sex, the things you crave. If you can stop using these things by yourself, you probably don't have an addiction.

Most people don't want to admit they have a weakness that is ruining their lives. You may be ashamed of what your lack of self-control has done to you. Instead of confessing your problem and accepting help, you may believe you can make it go away by trying harder, making the right changes or going to church. Yet, believing that you can solve your own problems is what caught you in the addiction in the first place. Admit you need help—from your family, friends, professionals, other addicts and God.

Myth #9: You either have self-control or you don't.

Researchers have developed a new way of thinking of the change process. It's called the *Stages of Change* because it is based on research that suggests self-control develops in stages. The first stage is *Not Ready to Change*. In this stage, Carol is unwilling to stop gambling, Mike logs onto his computer every night and Linda eats whenever she is anxious. The second stage is *Ready to Change*. During this stage, Mike wants to stop meeting women and using pornography online, Linda wonders whether there is an Overeaters Anonymous group in her area and Carol notices the gambling addiction hotline number posted at the casino. During the third stage, *Action*, Linda stops eating when she isn't hungry and joins a support group, Carol blocks herself from gambling apps and calls the gambling hotline and Mike talks to a professional counsellor about his internet use. The last stage is *Maintaining Change*. Continued growth and relapse prevention in this stage make freedom from addiction a reality.

It's important to get the appropriate help at each stage of change. If you find yourself at the *Not Ready to Change* stage, you will not benefit from information about where to find twelve-step groups. Instead, you need information about the consequences of continuing your habit, which might motivate you to change. Decide where you are with respect to your problem behavior and use the information for that stage listed on the next few pages.

Stage 1: Not Ready to Change

Myth #10: You'll never begin recovery until you've hit bottom.

The need to 'hit bottom' is a myth if you believe that means losing everything—friends, family, career, savings and self-respect. Some people won't make changes even when they do lose everything. Others will eagerly make changes when they experience one loss. Generally we are unwilling to change until the negatives of our behaviour outweigh the positives.

One way to move out of this stage is to make a list of the positive and negative effects of your habit. What are the positive consequences? Does eating help you calm down? Write that down. Does working long hours make you feel good about yourself? Note it. Now make a list of the negative consequences of your habit. To recognise these consequences, you may need to read about your particular behaviour problem or talk to others who have struggled with the same compulsion and ask them about the costs. Does your pride cause problems with co-workers? Does your need for approval allow people to take advantage of you? As you make your list, think about the effects your addiction has on you physically, emotionally, socially and spiritually. Here are some facts to consider:

- Eight million people worldwide die each year as a result of smoking.
- Current daily smokers, on average, smoke 12 cigarettes per day.
- Obesity increases the risk of heart disease, stroke, type 2 diabetes, cancer, sleep apnea and osteoarthritis.
- Addiction is estimated to have cost the Australian economy more than \$80 billion in 2021.

- Pornography use can shape sexual practices and may strengthen attitudes supportive of sexual violence and violence against women.
- Pathological gambling can adversely affect the individual, family, and society, and also carries high rates of psychiatric chronic diagnoses.
- The effects of sex addiction can include impact on physical and mental health, emotional distress, decreased self-esteem and risky behaviour.
- Significant mental health issues including anxiety and depression.

Even if the worldly consequences of your addiction do not concern you, the eternal consequences should. God tells us this: '*... A man reaps what he sows. The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life*' (Galatians 6:7b-8). Jesus asserted that '*No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. ...*' (Matthew 6:24a). You cannot be devoted to both God and money, to both God and food, to both God and drugs. Think about what the future holds if you continue to serve your false god.

Stage 2: Ready to Change

When you are in Stage 2, you know that you must find self-control or be destroyed. You are probably excited to make the changes that can set you free from the slavery of addiction. The first step is to confess your sin to God. God loves you and God's son, Jesus, paid the price for your sins—including your addiction—so that you can know him personally. Tell God you are sorry that you turned to the chocolate, the TV, the praise of others or the pokies to make you feel better. Stop and pray right now:

Dear Father, please forgive me for not making you first in my life. I am sorry that I trusted in _____ when I should have trusted in you. I want to let go of all my false gods, but I cannot give them up on my own. I know I can be saved only because of your son, Jesus. Please come into my heart and control my life. Amen.

Once you know that nothing on earth can bring you lasting peace the way God can, you can experience the joy of being forgiven. No matter what you have done or left undone, God promises to forgive you because of Jesus.

Before you can progress to the *Action* stage, you must decide if you will stop using the problem substance, behaviour or relationship completely or will you simply reduce your use. Will you go cold turkey on cigarettes or try to cut back? Will you remove the computer from your home or limit the hours you use it? Know that only five to fifteen percent of alcoholics will eventually be able to drink in moderation and most addicts decide that they must give up their habits completely. If you find you cannot use alcohol, cigarettes or games of chance in moderation, choose complete abstinence.

There are many different ways to treat an addiction. If you're addicted to a substance like cocaine, you have different needs than someone who is a compulsive gambler. If you are addicted to a drug you may need a physician's care. You may even need to be admitted to a hospital for a short time while your body adjusts to going without the drug. Good medical care can reduce the negative effects of withdrawal. Also decide if you want a counsellor to help you with related problems such as depression, anxiety or a history of abuse. Ask doctors, counsellors and treatment programs what they believe is the best treatment for your type of addiction.

As you recover, set up a support system. First, tell your friends and family that you need help kicking your habit. They can help you stay committed and may be able to recommend a good doctor or therapist. Second, locate a support group. A support group can be the difference between just thinking about changing and actually doing it. Twelve-step groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous and Gamblers Anonymous have proven effective in the treatment of addictions. Some support groups do not use a twelve-step approach. Determine, with God's help, which approach is best for you.

Finally, look for a church home. A good church is honest about sin and our inability to do anything about it. It points you to Jesus and everything he has done and everything He offers you—forgiveness, strength and life. It is a place where hurting, broken people can come together and confidently proclaim their victory through the Lord Jesus Christ.

Stage 3: Action

Myth # 11: Admitting you have a problem is half the battle.

Admitting you have trusted in something that can destroy you is a major step toward a better life. Letting go of the substance, behaviour or person you have loved can be very difficult. Believing you can break your bad habit without help can keep you in bondage for years. Satan will encourage you to believe in your own power by suggesting, 'If you were a really strong person (or a true Christian), you wouldn't need any help.' He may say, 'Forget AA! Those people are a bunch of phonies who drink after meetings.' Twelve-step programs will tell you that the first step is to admit you are powerless in overcoming your addiction. If you continue to believe you can go it alone, God will let you fail. Remember that God wants to be your first love, the one you depend on to meet every need. Yet God has graciously provided you with doctors, counsellors, support groups and churches to help you find self-control. Stay committed to your treatment. God will be faithful in helping you become addiction-free.

There are a number of life changes you can make that will support your treatment, and the more you change your life, the easier it will be to give up your bad habit. This works because of how you learn. When you got high or felt calmer by indulging in your addiction, your brain remembered everything associated with that good feeling. If, for instance, you always have a cigarette while you drink coffee, your brain learns that coffee means a cigarette is coming. Changing your routines (like giving up coffee) will reduce the temptation. So if you are trying to give up cigarettes, get rid of everything that reminds you of smoking. Avoid people who encourage you to smoke. If you always smoke in the same chair, start sitting somewhere else. Do things that don't fit with smoking, like painting the inside of your house to get rid of the brown tint, having your car deodorised, getting your teeth whitened and starting an exercise routine.

When you begin making positive changes, you will likely be tempted to return to your old ways. Be prepared by reading books and listening to podcasts and music that encourage you. If you have never read a Bible, you may be surprised to learn how much information it has about addiction and self-control. Try *The Life Recovery Bible*, which includes twelve-step devotions and helpful ideas for recovery. God can direct you to verses that will speak to your heart. I have found hope in the following verses:

'Don't you realize that those who do wrong will not inherit the Kingdom of God? Don't fool yourselves. Those who indulge in sexual sin, or who worship idols, or commit adultery, or are male prostitutes, or practice homosexuality, or are thieves, or greedy people, or drunkards, or are abusive, or cheat people—none of these will inherit the Kingdom of God. Some of you were once like that. But you were cleansed; you were made holy; you were made right with God by calling on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God' (1 Corinthians 6:9-11).

'But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law' (Galatians 5:22-23).

'For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline' (2 Timothy 1:7).

'For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say "No" to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age' (Titus 2:11-12).

'For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness' (2 Peter 1:5-6).

Add verses that uplift you into your phone that you can take anywhere. Read them often, particularly right before you will be in a tempting situation. Praying regularly (every hour if necessary) can also help you enlist God's power to resist temptation.

When you are in the middle of temptation, use this four-step process suggested by Gwen Shamblin, author of the *Weigh Down Diet* and creator of *Exodus From Strongholds*

- Tell God how you are feeling ('I really want a cigarette because I'm so nervous').
- Ask God to help you instead ('Lord, please help me calm down without smoking').
- Confront Satan's lies ('Just one cigarette DOES hurt!').
- Avoid the temptation (Go to a non-smoking area).

Taking action can bring self-control for a time, but you must maintain the changes to find true freedom from addiction.

Stage 4: Maintaining Change

There are some people for whom an addiction has been instantly removed by God upon their confession of sin and plea for help. But most of us can expect that the release from bondage to a substance, relationship or behaviour will take time.

Myth #12: I used to be an addict.

Twelve-step groups emphasise the importance of recognising that once you're an addict, you're always an addict. Being an addict doesn't mean that you are drinking, drugging gambling or overeating every day. God may have given you the power to say no to the substance, behaviour or relationship that controlled you. But being addiction-free means that you must accept God's overcoming power on a daily basis. Recovering addicts cannot afford to forget the depths from which God has saved them. Even people who have kicked their habit for years have suddenly gone back to their old ways.

By the power of God, you know *'I can do everything through Him [Christ] who gives me strength'* (Philippians 4:13). No matter how long it takes, you can be victorious. The most important thing you can do is refuse to give up! God will not give up on you. Each day that you face temptation, God is teaching you and strengthening you. As you take in less food, shopping and gambling and more God, you will feel more at peace than ever.

Expect to return to earlier stages of change at times. God does not expect you to be perfect. God just wants to help you be your best. After a while, people sometimes stop doing the things that supported their new addiction-free lifestyle. Perhaps you started drinking coffee again and it wasn't a problem. But then you started going outside at break time with friends who smoke. You quit reading your Bible. Maybe you even smoked a cigarette. Don't panic. Confess the slip to God, who loves you and forgives freely. Ask for his help and do the things that worked for you at first. By God's grace, you will no longer serve your false god.

How Can I Help My Loved One Find Self-Control?

The twelfth step in Christian recovery programs is seeking to help others. Once you are well on your way to freedom from addiction, you can make a difference in people's lives by

- sharing this booklet and other Christian materials you've found helpful;
- inviting them to join you at your support group meetings;
- making yourself available any time by phone or e-mail;
- having family and friends confront the problem in love;
- setting limits on hurtful behaviours (e.g., not allowing visits in your home until drug use is stopped);
- praying often for your friend or loved one to come to faith and find freedom from addiction.

As you serve others in this way, you will find yourself encouraged and thankful for your own recovery.

Concluding Thoughts

Perhaps you could identify with Carol, Mike and Linda when you were introduced to them and their addictions. God cares about Carol's gambling, Bob's Internet use and Linda's overeating. God wishes they would ask him to meet the desires of their hearts instead. God cares about you too. He can provide you with the self-control you need to live in this addictive world. Accept God's gift of self-control right now by

- praying for his help and guidance;
- calling friends and family to help you in recovery;
- locating a church and support group near you.

Helpful Resources

Alcoholics Anonymous Australia
www.aa.org.au 1300 222 222

Lifeline
www.lifeline.org.au 13 11 14

Kids Helpline
www.kidshelpline.com.au 1800 55 1800

Health Direct
www.healthdirect.gov.au 1800 022 222

Alcohol and Drug Foundation
www.adf.org.au 1800 250 015

Family Drug Support Australia
www.fds.org.au 1300 368 186

Counselling Online
www.counsellingonline.org.au

Gambling Help Online
www.gamblinghelponline.org.au 1800 858 858



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Revised by Lutheran Media 2025

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