

# Addictive systems

*Anne Wilson Schaef*

**T**O UNDERSTAND ADDICTIVE SYSTEMS, we first must start with understanding addiction in individuals. This is not to say that the individuals are wholly responsible for the addictive systems in which they find themselves. There is no doubt that individuals contribute to addictive systems – of course they do. Yet addictive systems also have a life of their own and contribute to the addictive functioning of the individual. There is no simple cause-and-effect relationship between the two. Addictive systems not only support addictions in individuals, they demand it. Those who are most comfortable and function the best in addictive systems are themselves addicts. Addicts feel most comfortable with other addicts and in addictive systems. One of the reasons that we need to start with individual addiction to understand addictive systems is that we know so much more about individual addictions than we do about addictive systems. *When society becomes an addict*<sup>1</sup> came out in 1986; *The addictive organization*<sup>2</sup> was published in 1988; ‘Is the Church an addictive organization?’<sup>3</sup> was published in *Christian Century* in 1990 and Michael Crosby’s *The dysfunctional Church: addiction and codependency in the family of Catholicism*<sup>4</sup> was published in 1991. The field is just in its infancy. Yet we have much valuable information about addiction to utilize.

## *Participation*

The most reliable source for understanding addiction is through and with addicts themselves. When I first became interested in addiction, it was because I wanted to understand it for others – not for myself. I was a very busy psychotherapist and as I learned about addiction (or so I thought), I began to see that many of my clients were untreated addicts. I knew that the twelve-step programme of Alcoholics Anonymous seemed to be the most effective approach for recovery so I decided to attend meetings *as an observer* to see why it worked. After a while (of smoke-filled meetings!) I saw that I could not understand the programme, addictions or recovery abstractly. I was functioning out of a ‘scientific’ non-participatory world-view. I believed in the myth of objectivity and observation. I had been taught that the most accurate information comes when we are detached and non-participatory. I

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quickly came to see that what I now see as old, addictive-system values of non-participation did not work in this setting. Wanting to understand addiction had created a major life challenge and a major life shift for me. In order to come to understand or hope to understand addictions, I had to move from an intellectual non-participatory world-view to a participatory world-view. In order to 'know' the twelve-step programme of Alcoholics Anonymous, I had to *work* the twelve-step programme of Alcoholics Anonymous. As a result of this and looking at my own addictive process – learned in society – I have come to an understanding of addictions and recovery that I could have never come to as an observer, a professional or an intellectual. I have come to see that a non-participatory world-view is itself one of the characteristics of the addictive process.

### *Substance and process addictions*

There are two major classes of addictions: substance and process addictions. Addictions are anything that is mood-altering, anything that puts us out of touch with our feelings and our spirituality, anything that alters our thinking process, anything that gives us an ungrounded 'high', anything we are tempted to lie about, or anything we feel we need to hold on to regardless of the consequences.

Substance addictions are addictions to substances we introduce into the body or generate in the body to create the conditions listed above. The body and the mind develop a dependency on these substances. Substance addictions opened the door to the initial understanding of addictions. Common substance addictions are: alcohol, drugs, prescription drugs, food, nicotine, caffeine, sugar, chocolate, salt and adrenaline – to name a few.

Process addictions have exactly the same effect as substance addictions and are just as powerful. They alter the mind and the thinking and cut us off from ourselves and our spirituality just as substance addictions do, and the withdrawal and recovery process can be fully as painful and difficult as that with substances. In fact, we have often found that recovery from process addictions may be even more difficult than from substance addictions, because the addictions themselves are so subtle and are much more integrated into society as a whole. Having said this, we should not underestimate the extent to which substance addictions are also socially integrated; an example is the case of the liquor and tobacco industries in the United States. Common process

addictions are: work, relationships, romance, sex, money, religion, shopping, spending, gambling, exercise and busyness.

When we limit our thinking to substance addictions that develop a measurable, physiological dependency of the body, we only have a partial understanding of addictions, thus putting ourselves in a position of not being able to deal fully with the range and tenacity of addictions.

Most people have more than one addiction, and individuals who have substance addictions are usually forced to face them first. In recovery circles we hear about 'starting with the addiction that is killing you the fastest', which is usually a substance addiction. As soon as the most obvious addiction is addressed, others move to the foreground. A common mistake that is made in the treatment of addictions is to treat the specific addiction, usually a substance addiction, and not to recognize the underlying addictive process. Often, individuals want to believe that they have dealt with their addictions when they have quit drinking or quit using drugs, and that indeed is great and a real accomplishment with the help of a 'higher power'. Yet stopping the using is just the tip of the iceberg. Every person in recovery knows, on the one hand, that to quit using the substance or the process is a relief and allows one to be 'dry', and on the other, that recovery is much more than dryness or stopping the physical dependency. Recovery is dealing with the underlying addictive process.

Regardless of whether one is dealing with a substance addiction or a process addiction, the characteristics and the processes are the same. The underlying addictive process is rather like switching channels on the television. Addicts will quit being active in one addiction and switch to another. We give up alcohol and switch to smoking. We give up smoking and switch to sugar. We give up sugar and switch to being involved addictively in work or relationships. The underlying addictive process is still intact: it is just the focus that has changed. Process addictions can be as destructive to our lives and our souls as substance addictions. Until we have some relief from the addictive process, we have not dealt with addiction.

The addictive processes are the way we have learned to survive in an addictive society. The addictive processes are what keep us not-dead-and-not-alive zombies, so that we fit into addictive systems. The addictive process is what supports and demands our addictions. The addictive process is a learned way of coping. The choice of a primary substance may have a physical basis, but at the same time, the underlying addictive process is learned and is the same for all substance and

process addictions. The twelve-step programme offers tools to deal with the addictive process, but it does not cure addictions. The twelve-step programme offers tools to allow for a shift into another more healthy way of functioning in this life and a shift out of the addictive process. Yet it is not the programme that heals. Healing comes from a live process and an active relationship with a power greater than ourselves. This relationship needs to be a participatory process in which each addict or addictive system takes responsibility for him- or herself. Recovery is not possible without responsibility, and we shall have more to say about this later.

### *Characteristics of addiction*

There are several characteristics which are cornerstones of the disease. Addiction is a many-sided, many-faceted process – hence, there are many cornerstones. The most important ones are: the illusion of control, dishonesty, self-centredness, fear, self-will, perfectionism, ‘stin-kin’ thinking’ and loss of spirituality. We shall consider each of these in turn.

#### *Illusion of control*

The illusion of control is one of the most devastating and destructive of the characteristics of addiction. There is not only a belief that one should control everything, there is a belief that one can control oneself and relationships. We see it on an individual and systemic level. Any system that is based on the illusion of control is by definition an addictive system. When we realize that our role in this life is not to control and that our role is to participate, life goes more easily.

#### *Dishonesty*

Dishonesty is so embedded in the addictive system that most individuals and institutions have to have a solid recovery before they even are able to see it. We are often dishonest about our controlling. We feel that we know best what others need and try to manipulate them into our goals for them. We lack respect. We lie about our finances. We lie to ourselves about what we are doing. We suggest that others might want to eat when we want to eat. We skirt issues, manipulate perceptions, participate in impression-management and lie about what we want or feel. As institutions, we limit participation and demand subservience and blind faith while not disclosing the truth about the way we function. We make interpretations of others and hold up our interpretations as truth when they are only based upon our thinking. We do not let our-

selves or others know who we really are. These ways of functioning are all dishonest.

### *Self-centredness*

A Cherokee Elder with whom I work says that she loves to make mistakes because she then knows that she is not competing with God and it is silly to compete with God. But this wisdom eludes many of us. We are self-centred. We believe that we are the centre of the universe and set ourselves up to be God, individually and institutionally.

Self-centredness is much more than putting the self first or being self-absorbed. When we are self-centred, we lose touch with ourselves. We forget who and what we are. We forget our place in the greater creation and we begin to believe that we are the centre of creation. This puts a terrible burden on us and we react with more control and dishonesty. This process can and does happen on an individual and an institutional level. We can become so lost in our addictive self and our imaginings that we lose touch with reality. We can become so absorbed in our distorted perception of truth that we fail to be open to the valid and sometimes conflicting truths that are all around us. Self-centredness is very tricky and very subtle. It is one of the most fascinating and challenging aspects of the addictive process.

### *Fear*

Fear is a cornerstone of the addictive process. Fear often underlies control, dishonesty and other aspects of addiction. There are several aspects of fear that bear examination on a personal and systemic level. When we feel fear, we try to control. When we try to control, we realize that we are involved in a losing proposition since we cannot control everything and we feel defeated and more fearful. In this way, we set ourselves on course for a downward spiral. The more we try to control, the more fearful and controlling we become.

Fear can be like a loose cannon. Once it is set in motion, it can attach itself to anything and everything.

Fear can also be used by an addictive organization to try to keep people in line and try to exert its illusion of control. Those in authority in the Church have sometimes used fear in this way while attempting at the same time to teach about a loving and compassionate God. If an institution really believes in what it is doing, it needs to overcome its own fear and trust that the truth of its message is valid and that it will get through to those who are ready to hear it, rather than relying on fear to intimidate others. We can also intimidate ourselves in this way.

*Self-will*

Self-will is another serious characteristic of addiction. Self-will means 'I want what I want when I want it and I would like it *how* I want it, too'. All of these characteristics are based on a lack of faith and an unwillingness to 'turn our will and our lives over to the God of our understanding'. Again we see this in individuals and in institutions. Self-will pushes us to try to make something happen that may not be good for ourselves or others, or just may not happen at the right time. Individuals and institutions often bloody themselves and others in forcing their self-will. We could even see the continuing destruction of the planet as a virulent consequence of self-will.

*Illusion of perfection*

The illusion of perfection has destroyed many lives and institutions. When we believe that we have to be perfect, we put ourselves in a position not to learn from our mistakes. We are 'competing with God'. This kind of perfectionism often results in cover-ups and dishonesty in governments, churches and individuals. We are part of the great spirit of all things *and* we are human. We are human institutions and we are human beings. In humility we can learn from our mistakes. Perfectionism precludes humility.

*Stinkin' thinking*

In recovery circles, there is a term called 'stinkin' thinking'. This term is used to describe the distorted thinking of the addict. Over the years, those of us who work in the field have observed that the thinking processes of the addict are similar to those of the schizophrenic. In fact, when schizophrenia was first introduced as an umbrella term to represent a 'class' of syndromes, alcoholism was one of the diseases included under that umbrella.

Schizophrenia is a thinking disorder. The addictive process is a disease of perception and thinking. Morris Berman in his great book on the philosophy of science, *The reenchantment of the world*, refers to this kind of thinking as 'disembodied' thinking. This is one of the more subtle characteristics of addiction to see because it is so embedded in the society. The form of addictive thinking is conceptual, abstract, ungrounded, and based on logical constructs which may or may not have any relation to reality. It can be as simple as building a 'story' about someone not liking us to developing an elaborate maze of 'logical' reasons on why our self-will is appropriate. A recent example of this kind of thinking is the relatively new 'sane use of alcohol' or controlled drinking movement for alcoholics that is challenging the

abstinence movement throughout the world. Anyone who works with addicts believes what the 'Big Book' of Alcoholics Anonymous says, that the disease is cunning, baffling, powerful and patient, because we have seen this. The disease will do anything to perpetuate itself. We see this in the sane use of alcohol movement in some places supported by the liquor companies. Every addict would like to keep on using with no consequences. That is the way the disease works.

Recently, the leader of this sane use of alcohol movement was arrested for killing two people while she was driving while intoxicated. The reasons behind 'sane use of alcohol' were very logical and rational. They just did not make any sense in relation to the disease of addiction.

I have known many researchers who dutifully do their research and then interpret it in whatever fashion supports their preconceived notions. The addictive system is always striving for 'objectivity' and has interpreted that term as being detached. True objectivity is being clear inside of 'stinkin' thinking' and not having to twist reality to support our own biases and beliefs. 'Stinkin' thinking' is unclarity and self-centredness run riot usually in an abstract, distorted way. We cannot read a newspaper, watch a tennis match, or peruse a magazine without running into this kind of 'normal' 'stinkin' thinking'. What are the Williams sisters feeling as they face each other across the net at Wimbledon, knowing one will lose and one will win? The commentator, with no clear information at all, will tell you, always speculating on the truth 'out there' being the same as their thinking 'in there'.

When we move from the observation to the 'why's', we are almost always engaging in a form of 'stinkin' thinking'. It is common in the society. It is a norm in western culture.

'Stinkin' thinking' is one of the most difficult areas of recovery for addicts and, in general, has not even been addressed by institutions and systems. Recovery from addictions is not possible if the distorted, abstract, paranoid, ungrounded thinking process is not dealt with in recovery.

### *Loss of spirituality*

Lastly, for our consideration, is the loss of spirituality. For addictive persons and institutions it is not that the spirituality has gone away, it is just that the addiction has put the addict or the institution so out of touch with themselves that they cannot go through themselves and touch that piece of the God of our understanding that is within each of us and connects us to the all that is.

A priest who once interviewed me for a radio show confided to me that he was in recovery for food addiction and that he had come to believe that there was more spirituality in the *basement* of his church than there was in the sanctuary, because the twelve-step meetings were in the basement and he had found his spirituality there. Addictive institutions often do not realize that they ever had or have lost their spirituality, because addicts have no memory, and hence cannot learn from experience.

### *Codependence as addiction*

Relationship addicts have the same characteristics as other addicts; they just act them out differently. Relationship addicts control through niceness and 'understanding' while other addicts often control through fear and intimidation. It is the same disease. It is the same addictive process.

Codependence and relationship addiction are the same thing. A few years ago, I was a speaker at the first national conference (USA) on codependence. The concept was one that was coming into its own. Since I had written one of the first books on the subject, I had an interest in the evolution of this concept. I had been working in the field for some time and had come to realize that the term 'codependence' was feeding into the problems of the disease itself and that codependants had the same disease as alcoholics and other addicts and were relationship addicts.

I had come to see that, indeed, the term codependence was keeping people from facing into their own addictive process and was impeding their healing. The term was feeding into two of the major character defects of relationship addicts in two major ways. First, relationship addicts like to be superior. By being 'co-dependants' they were not really as bad as these addicts and could continue to feel superior. Second, the main character defect of the relationship addict is external referencing – focusing on those outside ourselves to define and justify ourselves. The term codependence feeds this debilitating process.

The 'experts' all agreed with my observations of the use of the term and then, in what I perceived a 'codependent fashion', decided to continue to use the term 'because people were used to it and were coming for help (money?) because of it'. This, in itself, might be seen as a case of 'stinkin' thinking'.

Codependence and relationship addiction are the same thing. Accepting relationship addiction as a reality is more honest and affords those suffering from this disease a better chance of recovery.



Paradoxically, almost all addicts, as they move along their path of recovery, come to the realization that they are relationship addicts and Al-Anons (relatives and friends of an addict), and find that working their recovery in the area of relationships leads to a new, important level of healing. Ultimately, we are still seeing the same addictive process.

On a systemic level, when we see the types of behaviour we have described as codependent as relationship addiction, we are better able to recognize systemic addiction and start to deal with the underlying systemic addictive process.

### *Individual recovery*

The best tool that I have found anywhere for dealing with the addictive process is the twelve-step programme of Alcoholics Anonymous. It was developed by addicts for addicts and has an understanding of addiction that has evolved from the inside out. As recovery programmes go, it is one of the most effective.

The twelve-step programme does an excellent job of helping people get 'dry', a term used to describe a state in which one is free of the particular substance or the addictive process, although not in a state of recovery. Beyond this, however, the twelve-step programme is also a tool to help addicts learn to recover from the past, take responsibility for the past, and basically begin to make a systems shift out of the addictive system and into a more participatory way of life.

Some, who do not completely understand addiction and recovery, are concerned that calling a substance or a process an addiction relieves people of the responsibility of dealing with the behaviour or destructiveness of the addiction, because in a true addiction they are 'powerless' over the addiction, and these 'critics' believe that this gives the addict the licence not to be 'responsible'. A good recovery programme does anything but. The recovery programme does not remove responsibility. In fact, the steps are designed to focus and demand responsibility (steps four to nine). The steps merely position the responsibility between the individual and a loving God. In recovery, addicts are expected to make amends for all the harm they have done in thought, word and action. They are expected to make 'living amends' by leading a more spiritually based life and acting out of that spirituality.

We need to take a moment to look at systemic recovery in relation to making amends and living amends. All too often, institutions (and individuals) believe that a simple 'I'm sorry' is adequate. 'I'm sorry' is

a start, but it certainly is not amends. To make amends is much greater and much more complex than to say 'I'm sorry'. 'I'm sorry' is first of all about the addict or addictive institution. It is good to feel sorry for something we have done. It is good to know when we have done something wrong and take responsibility for it. Yet many an addict has said the 'I'm sorry', over and over again, and nothing has changed. Amends are recognizing and *feeling* the being sorry and then *making a major change in the way we operate*. It is making a shift in the way we think, feel and live from that moment on.

The addict or addictive institution makes amends for themselves. This is very important to remember. The amends and the shift are essential in their sobriety. They cannot continue to experience the joys and serenity of sobriety if they do not make a major shift in their living and being. If they do not make a shift, their 'amends' are as hollow as the words of the drunk who promises never to take another drink.

For example, Fools Crow, the great spiritual leader of the Lakota Sioux Indians, said that the United States could never become truly a great nation until they kept their treaty of the sacred Black Hills with his people. Bill Clinton and the Congress apologized to the Hawaiian people for the illegal overthrow of their monarchy – and that was it. Nothing changed. This is an apology in the service of the addictive system, not amends in the interests of healing. Healing requires a major systems shift.

Clearly, recovery is not an easy process, nor is it a quick process. One of the miracles of recovery is that so many people are willing to step upon the path of recovery when they do not really know what recovery means. Often it is said that if they knew, they would never have started. Sometimes recovery is begun because the present is just too painful, and then even the unknown looks better. There are also those who come from dysfunctional families and institutions and have never known anything but the addictive process. That they start recovery is truly an act of faith and often a deep inner knowing that there is something that is healing and better. There are also those who want 'a little recovery'. They want to give up the pain of the addiction and not really change their lives and move into their full spirituality. They will probably use again or continue using.

Recovery at its most significant level is a return to one's spirituality. It is a return to an inner spirituality. This may not be, or it may be, the spirituality of one's upbringing. It is always the spirituality of one's being. Let me distinguish between religion and spirituality here. Religion is an institutionalized, intellectual approach to spirituality that

has been taught. Spirituality is participation in that deep pool of knowing a higher power that is our birthright.

As we give up those processes or substances that keep us out of touch with ourselves, we discover a deep well of oneness with all creation that is our birthright and a given of our beings.

We also need to discover that our addictions have been cloaking many deep unresolved issues that need to be worked through and healed, usually on an emotional-feeling level. We need to get our lower selves working in harmony with our conscious selves so that we can move through our lower selves to our higher selves. Religion has tended to ask us to cut off our lower selves rather than see them as an important part of creation and the way to have access to our higher selves and the oneness with all that is.

In dealing with addictions for the last twenty-five years, I was pushed to leave the field of psychotherapy, which I came to see as institutionalized 'codependence' and a threat to my personal recovery. In leaving the field, I developed an alternative to psychotherapy which I call *living in process* which comes out of very ancient knowledge and spirituality. The *living in process* work supports a systems shift (out of the addictive system) while learning a whole, spiritually participatory way of being in the world.

In the deep process work, people move beyond the control of their conscious mind into their deep inner being where true healing can take place, and hence open the pathway to their full connection with their spiritual beings. (For more information see *Beyond therapy, beyond science*<sup>5</sup> and *Living in process*.<sup>6</sup>)

As individuals recover their participatory spirituality, they have to deal with the addictive systems in their lives. If they are willing to go to any lengths for their sobriety this may lead to drastic measures, and if they are truly living their spirituality, they will keep the focus on themselves and what they need while respecting and honouring others.

### ***Systemic recovery***

There is a growing recognition that the society or system that we have developed over the centuries is a dysfunctional, entropic system that is not good for the people in it or for the planet. We do have other models, and within western culture itself we are beginning to develop other models for functioning. Most of these models (that seem to be working) involve some form of recovery from addictions, and a moving out of

the virtual reality of systems built on abstractions, concepts and addictions themselves.

Systemic recovery is admittedly more difficult to achieve than individual recovery, *and* it is possible.

There are many families who have moved to new levels of being because one member went into recovery and brought the others along by example. Families are a system. They have been damaged by addiction when it is there and they need to recover.

One of the systemic characteristics of addiction is an increased level of insanity. In addictive institutions, whether they be families, churches or corporations, when they are functioning addictively, there is an increased tolerance for insanity. There is probably not one of us who has not looked at a battering family situation and has said, 'Why do they put up with it?' 'Why do they keep going back?' 'We can see the insanity, why can't they?' The answer is that as the addictive process progresses, the tolerance for insanity increases. People in that situation focus their energy on survival. They have no perspective.

Many institutions exhibit an extremely high tolerance for insanity. Also, in doing consulting with addictive institutions, I discovered that many do not really want to heal. They want to 'look like' they want to heal. They just do not want to change.

I also discovered that there are usually three or four possible scenarios in institutions where individuals begin to recover. The first is that the institution becomes entrenched and wants to get rid of people who are getting healthier because they are a threat to the system. They usually do this by making them 'bad' or 'wrong', hence ridding themselves of the most healthy people in their organizations. Or else, they put pressure on them to 'get back in line' and become a team player. Or they ignore them and hope they will go away. Or, more rarely, they see them as a great resource for the organization and start to change.

Likewise, when people start to recover, they find themselves faced with decisions in systems they find intractable. They can just focus on their own recovery and detach themselves. They can find that the organization is a threat to their sobriety and leave. They can try to bring change to the organization (not a good idea in early recovery). Or they can leave for a while until they feel stronger in their recovery and consider returning at some later date.

Systems are slow to change *and* they can change.

### **Priorities**

Every recovery programme emphasizes that to recover from the cunning, baffling, powerful and patient process of addiction, we have to be willing to put our spirituality first. That is what life is, is it not, putting our spirituality first?

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### NOTES

1 Anne Wilson Schaef, *When society becomes an addict* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1986).

2 Anne Wilson Schaef, *The addictive organization* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1988).

3 Anne Wilson Schaef, 'Is the Church an addictive organization?', *Christian Century* (January 1990).

4 Michael Crosby, *The dysfunctional Church: addiction and codependency in the family of Catholicism* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 1991).

5 Anne Wilson Schaef, *Beyond therapy, beyond science* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992).

6 Anne Wilson Schaef, *Living in process* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998).