How does a person become dependent or addicted?

There are many theories about addiction and some experts now use the term dependence because it better describes the relationship between a person and his/her habitual use of a behaviour or a drug to try and get rid of feelings the person doesn't know how to deal with. We will use both terms in this information package.

Addiction is a complicated topic and not everyone agrees on the fact that a person can be addicted to sex. As a condition or behaviour pattern, sexual addiction has always existed, but the behaviour was not described as a dependence. Defining it in the language of addiction clarifies understanding for some people because it gives them a model or a way of looking at a problematic behaviour. However, it also creates some confusion when society decides to label an accepted behaviour or way of thinking in a new way. As well, depending on the particular person and his/her circumstances, compulsive sexual behaviour can also fall under a number of classifications like a psychosexual developmental disorder, a mood disorder, an impulse control disorder or an obsessive compulsive disorder.

Following are some of the various theories about addiction/dependence:

- Addiction is an out of control bad habit that people can unlearn.
- Addiction is caused by inner conflict about behaviour that contradicts a person's values and lack of maturity or knowledge about how to deal with the conflict.
- The Jungian Theory suggests addiction is an imbalance of an inner and outer life focus.
- Family Systems Theory suggests that addictions are the result of family dysfunction.
- Addiction is sometimes the result of trying to cope with a psychological problem, for example anxious depression or mental illness.

- Addiction results from a genetic pattern passed on through a person's family.
- People become addicted to the neuro-chemical changes that take place in the body during sexual arousal and climax.
- Dependence can also be part of a response to some type of trauma. People dealing with a sexual dependency or addiction have often been sexually abused or assaulted at some point in their lives.

What all this tells us is that there is no simple definition for addiction or common language that everyone uses. Many experts see it as a complex issue involving the interaction of several of these factors. Each person will have their own story to tell. However, an important concept that is often present in the lives of addicts is shame. It is both a cause and a result of addiction and grows as the person becomes increasingly dependent on the "fix" – whatever that is.

Dependency is not just about a person engaging in a particular behaviour. It is about how that person is living their life. Addiction is usually the result of trying to find a way of dealing with life's difficulties and the unhappiness that often results from not knowing how to cope effectively. It is like a person's poor coping skills or bad habits turn something normal into something self destructive. Some experts believe that the "feel good right now" mentality of North American culture helps feed the addictive process.

There is a growing understanding that a person actually becomes dependent on an *experience* even when that experience also involves addiction to a drug. The experience of a particular behaviour pattern or of using a substance becomes addictive because the person feels better and gives the experience some type of special meaning. "A person is drawn to an addictive behaviour or substance because of the way it affects his or her emotions. It enhances some feelings and numbs out others. Emotional pain is reduced momentarily … and the hope is that it will not come back. Of course it does." (from www.healthymind.com - the Nature of Addiction).

The person will stay dependent as long as s/he believes the addiction still helps deal with life stresses and unhappiness. This is why

it is so difficult for someone to convince an addict to change their dependent behaviour if he or she is not ready to give up that special feeling or doesn't see other reasonable options for dealing with life's difficulties. Although addiction gives people the sense of being in control, in reality, their dependency eventually ends up controlling them. Like other addictions, without help and/or a conscious effort to change, sex dependency is progressive. Over time it gets more frequent, more extreme, or both.

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