

Disconnection: A Likely Cause of Addictions

Michael Peterson & Brad Jersak in Dialogue



*"The opposite of addiction is not sobriety.
It is human connection."*

—Johann Hari

In an article titled “The Likely Cause of Addiction Has Been Discovered, and It Is Not What You Think,”¹ Johann Hari (author of *Chasing The Scream: The First and Last Days of the War on Drugs*) presents a strong case for believing that addictions are rooted, not in chemical hooks, but in disconnection or alienation. The best treatment, he proposes, is human connection. Love is, of course, shorthand for human connection. Drs. Michael Peterson and Brad Jersak reflect on these findings.

Michael Peterson: Two Thoughts

1) First, the author contrasts the traditional treatment approach of bio-behavioral therapies and cognitive interventions over against a love-based approach. The final sentence states,

“For a century now, we have been singing war songs about addicts. It occurred to me as I wiped his brow, we should have been singing love songs to them all along.”

I found this concluding thought intriguing from the standpoint of God’s grace and love—how this statement and general scientific study outcomes both point to the potential power of God’s grace and love. It seems to me that the world was created and runs best when God’s love is reflected, demonstrated and implemented in addictions, healing, marriages—you name it.

When we operate and function on a premise or approach other than God’s grace (generally speaking), we invariably end up in the wrong place or doing the wrong thing. However, even if

we end up in the wrong place (i.e. addiction), God's love can bring us back and heal us. Here we find a problem within "religious institutions" that tend to address "sin" with approaches other than grace and love. Rules, rituals and regulations (i.e. bio-behavioral approaches) executed by religion don't heal, whereas God's grace and unconditional love can and do heal.

2) Second, we have often tried to argue for God's existence through a variety of "proofs," but might God's existence better be confirmed via the application of love? If God is love, then his creation ought also to work best from a "grace-based, love-based approach."

This article, in my mind, is like a scientific affirmation of God's grace, but also a point of proof for God's existence. An evolutionary naturalism

to see all of this in action. To heal a nation, family, community or individual, it is the operationalization and outflowing of godly love that leads to better outcomes, lives and relationships.

Brad Jersak: Response

I very much agree with this line of thinking. Moreover, this has been my consistent experience of 12-step recovery, with which I've been closely involved since 2008.

The foundation of the program is our belief that condemnation, accusation and judgment do nothing for the addict. Addiction is a disease over which self-control and self-will are utterly powerless. Nor can addiction be scorned or punished out of anyone.

Addiction, like "sin," requires nothing less than the treatment of the Great Physician through real human connection.

WITHIN 12-STEP FELLOWSHIPS, GOD OR A "HIGHER POWER" IS NOT IDENTIFIED WITH A PARTICULAR CREED OR DOGMA (SO THAT ALL ARE WELCOME), BUT IS REPRESENTED AS LOVING, CARING, FORGIVING AND NON-CONDEMNING...

approach makes no sense to the treatise of the author. Rather, a world designed by a God of love to operate in alignment with his being/character makes more sense. Dysfunction at any level within the system (individual, family, community, nation, etc.) invariably leads to sin, death and negative outcomes.

Thinking of the current state of the U.S. right now, we seem

In any 12-step fellowship, we are taught that the character defect lurking at the root of every addiction problem is self-will (autonomy, just as you see it in the fall of Adam). Attempting to strive our way out of any dysfunctional behavior only feeds and strengthens the addiction.

Instead, the solution is belief in a power greater than ourselves (normally referred to

as "God") who can free us from the bondage in which we're hopelessly entangled. Within 12-step fellowships, God or a "Higher Power" is not identified with a particular creed or dogma (so that all addicts feel welcome), but is represented as loving, caring, forgiving and non-condemning (and not many gods fit that bill).

Accepting oneself and surrendering to God's grace and care through the other men and women in recovery is the active ingredient in our healing. We've seen remarkable transformation by the time we come to step 3: "We made a decision to turn our lives and wills over to the care [not the control] of God."

"Care" here means love, grace, acceptance—what Hari's article is talking about. Later, in step 11, we seek through prayer and meditation to increase our conscious contact—*i.e. connection*—with that God. That is, through God's self-revelation, the addict comes to know and experience God's unfailing love and radical acceptance.

I've been active in 12-step recovery long enough to see a variety of dynamics that impact transformation. Four thoughts to keep in mind:

- 1. If the addict cannot accept that they are powerless to save themselves, they will keep stumbling.** While addicts must accept responsibility for their lives and actions, unwillingness to see that grace alone can save them leads to repeated relapses. It's not that they don't participate



in the work of recovery, but they are participating through surrender to God's love rather than attempting to dig themselves out of their own pit of self-will.

2. If the addict cannot believe that God loves them as they are today, warts and all, they will spurn grace and prolong their recovery. They may believe they are unworthy of God's love. So what do they do? They strive to make themselves worthy, which is a strange kind of pride that refuses to bottom out.

3. All fellowships are expected to embody God's unconditional love. The only requirement for "membership" in a 12-step fellowship is a desire to be free. However, I know that some addicts can become fundamentalists in the program. This too is a sign of pride, so in their impatience with those who relapse, they may communicate shame and rejection. This is not a program

glitch; it is a departure from recovery that makes it religious.

4. Our addiction can become an unexpected blessing. In some recovery programs, the addiction (and the "inner addict") is considered the *enemy* from which God must set us free. That makes sense. But in others, those in recovery reflect on their addiction as a *blessing*, because ultimately, it played a part in God's redemption from the slavery of self-will into the care of a loving God. From what I've seen, the latter is far more effective.

Michael Peterson

When we take God's love out of the picture, we invariably set ourselves up for failure. Moreover, when we accurately define God's love for what it truly is—unconditional, grace-based, relentless, never-ending, all-forgiving, all-merciful, and all-encompassing—and then surrender to it, it transforms us. It

is the power that heals, delivers and comforts. To see God for who God is, is truly a blessing. Often, science itself gives us glimpses of God's amazing love—if we are willing to see it.

By allowing God to work his love through us, by yielding to him, we as counselors, treatment deliverers, friends and relatives can perhaps be an instrument that he uses to help, comfort, encourage and heal others. If the world was created in love and for love, then it stands to reason that the more we yield to that love, the better off we all will be. □

Michael Peterson is a university professor who teaches Behavioral Health & Nutrition.

Brad Jersak is Associate Dean of Stephen's University's Master of Ministries program and an addict in recovery.

Notes

1. https://www.huffingtonpost.com/johann-hari/the-real-cause-of-addicti_b_6506936.html