

The Real Addiction

Why We Chase Feelings, Not Things

When we hear the word "addiction," we often think of drugs, alcohol, cigarettes, or social media. We point to the object and call it the addiction. But what if the object is not the true addiction?

A person addicted to alcohol is not craving the bottle itself. A person scrolling endlessly on social media is not truly attached to a screen. A gambler is not in love with cards or slot machines. What they seek is the feeling these things provide.

Human beings are constantly pursuing emotional rewards. Some seek happiness. Others seek excitement, comfort, validation, connection, or an escape from emotional pain. The object of addiction changes from person to person, but the underlying desire remains surprisingly similar: the desire to feel better than we do at this moment.

This explains why people can overcome one addiction only to develop another. The source changes, but the need remains. Someone may stop drinking and become obsessed with work. Another may leave social media only to become dependent on constant approval from others. The target shifts because the mind is still chasing the same emotional reward.

Perhaps the greatest misunderstanding about addiction is believing that people are attached to substances. In many cases, they are attached to the feelings those substances create. The substance is merely a doorway.

This does not mean happiness is harmful. The pursuit of happiness is natural. The problem begins when a single source becomes the only path to that feeling. When our emotional well-being depends entirely on one person, one substance, or one activity, dependence begins to grow.

The question, then, is not "What are people addicted to?" The better question is "What feeling are they trying to reach?"

Maybe the real addiction is not the substance at all. Maybe it is the emotional state that lies behind it.

ADDICTION AND DOPAMINE

What Is Dopamine?

Dopamine is often called the "feel-good chemical," but that description isn't entirely accurate. Rather than creating pleasure itself, dopamine plays an important role in wanting, motivation, focus, and the urge to repeat behaviors that our brain finds rewarding.

This system plays an important role in motivating us toward things that support our survival and well-being, such as eating, forming social connections, and achieving our goals. However, certain substances and behaviors can hijack this reward system by producing unusually strong dopamine responses. When this happens repeatedly, it can create the conditions in which addictive patterns begin to develop.

DOPAMINE TRAP

A dopamine trap is the term which describes the repeated reward that can keep them in the behavior and potentially contribute to addictions.

IS ADDICTION AN ESCAPE DOOR OR THE RESULT

When someone experiences intense stress, loneliness, boredom, or emotional discomfort, they may look for something that provides relief or pleasure. This can become their “escape door.” Social media, gaming, substances, gambling, or other rewarding activities can temporarily change how they feel.

But when the behavior is repeatedly rewarded, the brain learns to seek it again. The person begins returning to the same behavior whenever they experience discomfort—or sometimes even when there is no obvious reason. Gradually, the escape can become a cycle: the more the behavior is repeated, the stronger the urge to repeat it can become.

This is where the idea of the “dopamine trap” comes in. The escape may be the doorway, but the repeated reward can become the path that keeps a person moving toward compulsive behavior and, in some cases, addiction.

Ironically, the person may eventually believe that the addiction itself is their escape. But perhaps the addiction is not the escape door—it is where the path has eventually led.

“Dopamine is not addiction itself, but its role in reinforcement can become a key part of the pathway toward addictive behavior.”

WHEN ESCAPE BECOMES THE ADDICTION

Recovery accounts provide evidence that stress and emotional distress can be important factors in why some people begin or continue addictive behaviors.

CASE 1: SUBSTANCE ADDICTION

Hypothetical example

This account describes a person who experienced depression for about a year. He tried medication, but felt that it was not helping and that he was losing money without seeing the results he wanted. A friend then recommended that he try a particular pill. Wanting to experience even a little happiness or relief from what he was going through, he began taking it.

In the beginning, everything seemed fine. However, over time, he found it increasingly difficult to function without the pills and began spending more and more money on them. Although they gave him temporary pleasure, they eventually affected both his mental and physical well-being.

In this case, the pills became the pit he fell into. What initially began as an attempt to find temporary happiness gradually became something he felt he could not live without. Repeated intake reinforced the behavior and eventually contributed to his addiction.

There is also an interesting contrast in his experience: he had stopped spending money on prescribed medication because he feared wasting money, yet he continued spending money on the pills because they provided the immediate feeling he was seeking. The reward became more important than the long-term consequences.

CASE 2: SOCIAL MEDIA ADDICTION

Hypothetical Example

This case describes a person who, after repeatedly failing to achieve his goals, began feeling hopeless. An acquaintance suggested social media as a way to distract himself and perhaps find new ideas for achieving his dreams. At first, he found motivation and useful ideas, but gradually became fascinated by the attention and money some creators received. He began creating content he never originally intended to make, eventually becoming dependent on followers, views, and validation. When his engagement dropped, so did his sense of satisfaction. He entered social media hoping to find a path to success and happiness, but gradually became trapped in the pursuit of digital approval. He wanted to become an influencer, but instead, he became influenced.

CASE 3: ONLINE GAME ADDICTION

Hypothetical example

The account described here is purely hypothetical and is intended only to illustrate how an individual may gradually develop an addiction to gaming.

The individual described had gradually lost interest in the things he once enjoyed. Feeling lonely and unable to achieve many of his goals in real life, he eventually turned to games as a form of escape. Initially, he played only occasionally—perhaps once a week or even once a month. Over time, however, he discovered that games provided something he struggled to experience in reality: a sense of achievement. Through completing levels, collecting rewards and diamonds, and sometimes spending small amounts of money, he could accomplish goals that seemed difficult or impossible in his real life. The early levels gave him frequent victories, making the game increasingly rewarding. But as the levels became more difficult, winning required more time, effort, and sometimes more spending. His frustration and desperation gradually increased, yet instead of stopping, he kept returning to the game in an attempt to regain the feeling of achievement he had experienced before. What had initially been a way to escape his loneliness and disappointment slowly became something he felt compelled to return to. The person who had once lost interest in almost everything had finally found something that interested him—but eventually, that interest became a trap. The game that had once helped him escape reality had become another reality he could no longer escape from.

THE REAL SOLUTION: CHASE BACK

If addiction can begin with the search for a feeling, then perhaps the first step toward preventing it is to understand what we are actually searching for. Instead of immediately choosing the first thing that promises relief, we can pause and ask ourselves: What am I really trying to escape from? What am I trying to feel? What do I actually need?

For someone struggling with loneliness, depression, failure, or disappointment, the first solution they encounter may seem like the easiest answer. But the first answer is not always the real solution. A person may need to step away from the problem for a while, travel, listen to music, watch meaningful films, enjoy good food, spend time in nature, write, exercise, or simply give themselves time to think. These things may not solve the underlying problem by themselves, but they can create the space needed to understand it and search for healthier answers. And when the problem is deeper or persistent, seeking professional help can also be an important part of that journey.

Validation is another feeling that people may begin chasing through addictive behaviours. But validation from others does not have to become the centre of a person's life. Someone who wants to be seen, appreciated, or recognised can explore themselves instead—discovering their talents, developing their skills, creating art, participating in sports, learning something new, or building something they are proud of. Recognition can come through growth and self-expression rather than through views, followers, likes, or constant approval. And even then, validation should not become the final destination. It can be meaningful, but it does not have to define a person's worth.

Sometimes, one of the most valuable things a person can have is a good friend. A friend does not necessarily have to be someone unrelated to you. It could be a family member, a teacher, a trusted person you meet unexpectedly, or even someone you may never meet again but whose words genuinely help you see things differently. What matters is not the label of the relationship, but the understanding and support it provides.

Ultimately, the person who experiences the addiction may be the one who understands its roots most deeply. The thing that created the addiction may also point towards what needs to be healed. If loneliness led someone toward social media, perhaps they need genuine connection. If failure led someone toward gaming, perhaps they need a healthier sense of achievement. If emotional pain led someone toward substances, perhaps they need support, safety, and a way to process that pain. The addiction may hide the problem, but looking closely at why it began can reveal where the solution needs to start.

Perhaps, then, the answer is not simply to ask, “How do I stop this addiction?” but to ask, “What made me need this in the first place?”

***Sometimes the first thing we find is only an escape—not the answer.
To find the answer, we have to chase back.***