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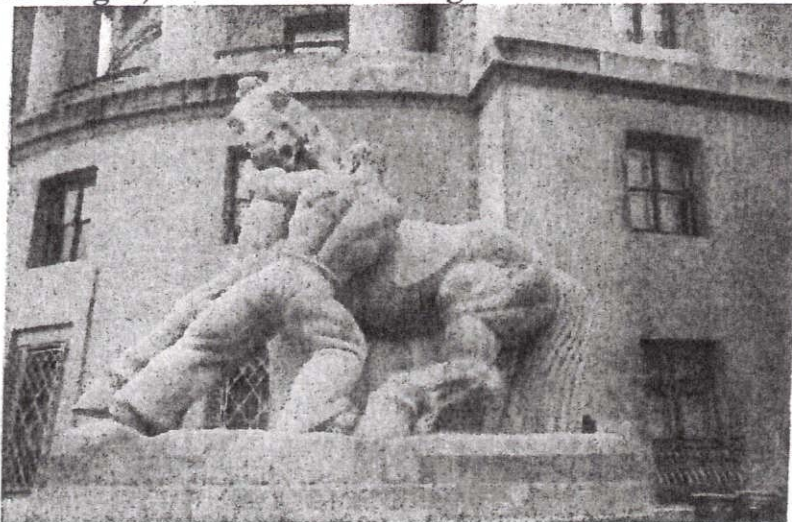
Posted by Mark Chamberlain, Ph.D. at 4:44 AM 0 comments 

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Don't Fight Your Urges, Cure Your Cravings



There are lots of reasons addiction continues, even when we're trying to stop.

One big contributor is the knee-jerk way we handle urges and cravings.

Let's talk first about how we usually handle them (which too often fails miserably) and then we'll talk about a more helpful way (which can help us stay on the path of recovery).

Once a craving is triggered, we find ourselves in an ambivalent state. This is the very nature of addiction. Part of my brain starts pressing on the gas pedal, another part the brake.

Here's where we start to go wrong: Since we've failed at times to resist our urges, we think we need to resist more intently in order to successfully avoid relapse. We assume that fighting harder will be the key. We throw all our weight into pressing on the brake.

- We think, "Oh, no!"
- We get single-minded about avoiding a lapse
- We think we have no choice but to fight, resist, restrain
- We hold our breath, put our head down, and try to weather this hard time

This approach can initiate an all-out arms race between our urges and our restraint. Once it gets going, we may be battling for hours--or even days!

The Path from Craving to Freedom

<http://markchamberlainphd.blogspot.com/>

<http://strengtheningmarriage.com/blog/>

When we crave, the primitive motivational core of the brain screams "Go!" We find ourselves drawn back to something we promised ourselves we would avoid.

A Fool's Dilemma:

In the throes of addiction, there are only two apparent ways out of the craving state. One is to resist. We try to wrench ourselves out of "Go!" and back into "Stop!" mode. The problem is, all of our "Stop!" efforts don't eclipse the "Go!" signal in the brain. An inner arms race of sorts is launched. Fighting a craving does not resolve it, and as we keep bouncing like a pinball back into the craving state we were trying to escape.

We sometimes get so tired of fighting that the other way out of our craving state not only sounds more and more appealing but starts to make more and more sense. We succumb to temptation. We give in and "Go!" We proceed from Craving and on to Indulging & Gratification, and then inevitably on to Satiation & Guilt.

After indulging, it may seem like we're free. Guilt and satiation both keep the craving monster at bay--for a time. However, indulging is just as sure a route back to craving, even if it is more roundabout than fighting was. The "Go!" state, when it returns, is stronger than ever, reinforced in the brain by the gratification of our latest indulgence.

The Best Way Out:

Anna Childress, a researcher at the University of Pennsylvania, is my heroine in the field of addiction. She has made a career of studying the brain's "Go!" signal and developing anti-craving tools and strategies.

The coolest thing Childress came up with was a creative way to help addicts pave a third path out of the craving state. She showed cocaine addicts videos of someone using cocaine, which triggered in them a craving state. Then, instead of leaving them to their usual options--fighting or succumbing--she guided them to practice a state of mastery by engaging in techniques such as calming their breathing and envisioning a sober future. They repeated this process over and over again, practicing effective coping skills while in a state of craving. Later, when they faced triggers in the real world, their brain had plenty of practice taking this third exit.

"Cue Exposure and Coping Skills Training" has been utilized and embellished by many others since Childress came up with it, and has been found to be extremely effective in reducing addicts' vulnerability to relapse. The sequence of going from craving to mastery starts to become almost as automatic as relapse once was.

The coolest part is that this third path doesn't just loop back to the trap of craving. The state of mastery enables an addict to move on with their day and eventually, when practiced

regularly, to move on with their life. Not only can we get better at it over time, it becomes more rewarding. Freedom is pleasurable in its own way, so the brain starts to become more enticed by the route of mastery.

Commit to the Process:

Amidst a devastating fire, hundreds of children safely exit the school building in an orderly manner. This feat is possible--and in fact almost automatic--because they practiced doing the same thing over and over during fire drills.

We can develop the ability to respond with the same alacrity to potentially devastating cravings, but we need the same kind of practice and repetition.

How To Practice Cue Mastery:

Commit now to beat your own path from craving to freedom by practicing Cue/Mastery twice a day over the next three weeks and then once a day for three weeks after that. You're building a neurological bridge that will enable your brain to go from craving to mastery in the heat of even the most tempting moments.

Here's how your twice-daily practice will go:

1. Bring to mind a trigger situation. Imagine it vividly.

2. Once you feel the pull, take your heart rate for 15 seconds.

3. Practice these mastery inducers/craving neutralizers:

- *take eight nice, slow, full breaths. Keep count by moving your thumb from one finger to another at the end of each exhale...*
- *then, dwell for a few moments on how much a future of freedom will mean to you...*
- *then, imagine doing something enjoyable or meaningful that's incompatible with relapse...*

4. Take your heart rate again for 15 seconds.

Keep a record of your practice. Think of it as your twice-a-day dose of antibiotic: take one first thing after waking up and again later right before going to bed.

I've not only seen the result of the research by Dr. Childress and others, I've seen the fruits of this technique in the lives of my clients. I'm confident that it will be well worth your while.

Let me know how it goes!

Posted by Mark Chamberlain, Ph.D. at 5:30 AM 0 comments 

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Our craving may have put us into *reactive mode*, but the way we're handling it has only intensified that reactivity. We're getting more intense and tunnel-visioned.

Reactive mode is a very different state of mind (and body) from *mastery mode*, which is how we operate when we're at our best.

In mastery mode:

- Problems are viewed as something to handle, not to panic about
- We remain broad-minded enough to notice what's actually going on
- We remain open-minded enough to remember that we have options and calmly look for ones we hadn't noticed before
- We keep breathing, learning, adapting--and then we get back to (and on with) our regularly scheduled life with as little fanfare and drama as possible

In reactive mode, we're like a resident of a burning building in a full panic. We're more likely to do things that don't serve us well.

In mastery mode, we're more like a trained firefighter. We know what we need to do and we go about doing it in spite of the heat.

To foster mastery, we can deliberately cultivate its characteristics:

- **Accept** the urge as a part of life (oh, yeah, that--yawn) instead of as this hugely significant problem or invitation and opportunity
- **Breathe** (nice, full breaths) to keep the brain oxygenated
- **Notice** (specific sights, sounds, touch) to keep oriented to what's real now instead of looping into panic or fantasy
- **Choose** how to respond. Experiment by trying out a different response instead of by doing what we've always done, which has so often failed

tempted, say to yourself: "Good! A chance to practice mastery!" He assured me that, if the week was typical, he would have plenty of chances to practice. I coached him to then *breathe* and *notice* what he can see, hear or feel... and then finally to deliberately *choose* to respond in a way he wasn't accustomed to.

It's convenient that these repeatable features of mastery mode follow the first letters of the alphabet:

- **A**ccept
- **B**reathe & Notice
- **C**hoose