

Culture and Addiction



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Does our culture create alcoholics and addicts?

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In this article I want to discuss how our culture sets us up for becoming an addict. Before I do it's important to realize we are all in a trance. We are hypnotized by our culture. This is not necessarily a bad thing, it just is the way things are. It happens in every culture; it has to.

Culture is transmitted through the family. Parents teach their children a world view. This world view is like a filter, it defines what is real and what isn't, it proscribes what is appropriate behavior and what isn't, it dictates how we should be and what we should feel. It defines what is and what isn't. It creates a socially constructed reality. The way this world view is taught in any particular family is unique because it is also influenced by the dynamics that shaped our parent's in their childhood.

The first world view we must discuss is that our culture is excessively focused on "having." This focus emerges from capitalism. Capitalism needs consumers. We are all indoctrinated in the absurd idea that more is better so we will want to buy a new car, new clothes, the latest mobile phone or tablet. In fact Erich Fromm observed that we internalize this attitude. We measure our self-worth by the quality and quantity of the material things we possess like money, homes, cars, and adult toys. I'm sure you heard that quote, "He who finishes with the most toys wins." This

attitude can be summarized as “I am more, the more I have.” We end up believing that our self-worth is determined by what we have, rather than on who we are. We have lost sight of the importance of character.

This obsession with “having” influences how we relate to self and others. We end up treating ourselves and others as objects. We become obsessed with how marketable we are. Women are typically viewed as sex objects and relate to themselves in this manner too. While men are usually viewed as success objects and also relate to themselves in this way too. A big problem in our society is that what makes a man successful on his job makes it nearly impossible for him to have a warm and loving intimate personal relationship. Any woman who treats herself as a sex object cannot be intimate with someone because she is overly concerned about her looks. This is part of the insanity. Our self-worth becomes other validated. We become dependent on our environment to make us feel good about ourselves. We never learn to validate ourselves.

This insanity also creates another problem. We become obsessed with more. More is better, isn't it? This is the nonsense we learn in our culture. And this is one of the ways our culture sets us up for addiction. I remember the moment I realized that we are all taught that more is better. It was one of those moments of clarity when I realized that this is at the heart of addiction. Addiction is the experience of believing that more is better. If one beer makes me feel good then more will make me feel better. If partying one night is great then partying every night is better. Unfortunately this nonsense applies to nearly everything in our lives. We are rarely satisfied with what we have or who we are.

We are obsessed with becoming something we are not. True self-esteem is rare, we just don't feel good enough as we are. Our idealized image of who we should be is corrupted by our world view. We are driven to be perfect. To fit into our idealized image of who we should be. It becomes all about more, more and more and more. We spend millions of dollars on the latest exercise equipment so we can become more attractive and have a better body. (Unfortunately most of it is gathering dust underneath our beds, closets or garages.) We pursue schemes to get rich so we can have more money which in some magical way will make us feel more secure. Women spend billions of dollars on plastic surgery to have the “perfect body.” Men are also visiting the plastic surgeon more than ever before. Men become workaholics because they are devoted having a successful career to have a better life. It's all about having, not being. We turn into humans, doing and performing, rather than humans, being (sic). What a tragedy!

Another nonsense that is promoted in our culture is that life should be easy and gratification instantaneous. We become obsessed with seeking to find the easier, softer way, and then hope for instantaneous results. We have lost the ability to wait, to have patience. Well life isn't easy and most worthwhile things don't come easily. But nobody tells us that. Instead we are bombarded with messages that tell us to take a magical pill and your headache will immediately disappear. There is no need to figure out a better way to handle your stress. If you are depressed take an antidepressant it will make you feel better. No need to figure out what you are doing that

makes you depressed. We buy weight loss medication from the infomercial on TV that promises to help us lose weight while we sleep, so there is no need to spend hours in the gym. It's easy.

When we turn to drugs they really work. I mean really work, instantaneously we feel better. We are sexier, more fun, more comfortable, more relaxed, more spontaneous. We are free from fears and concerns. We are free from the false-self that develops to fit into this insane culture. I had a friend who stated that he didn't know if he was born an alcoholic but the moment he took his first drink he knew that an alcoholic was born. It worked. It was easy. It set him free from all of this nonsense.

We are set up to become addicted. We become addicted to drugs including alcohol, to sex, to gambling, to compulsive overeating or restricting. We become addicted to spending money, buying new clothes, finding a better boyfriend or girlfriend, wife or husband. We become addicted to more.

I may sound paranoid but there is a cultural conspiracy that undermines the development of our true, spiritual self. We are encouraged to abandon our true-self and become an idealized self riddled with our culture's proscription of who we should be. We sell out but deep down inside we know something is wrong.

Our dissatisfaction with this nonsense – is good news. Maybe this is what we really mean when we say we have a “dis-ease.” We are dissatisfied with who we are and how we are living our life. Don't run from this pain. It means that something is “right” about you. Jung described us as having a “spiritual thirst.” It is our spiritual self or our real-self that is reaching out to us, to be actualized. It is like an alarm clock that will continue to ring until we wake up. So it's what is right about us that doesn't allow us to completely abandon ourselves to all of this nonsense.

Recovery helps us find our lost, true-self. It helps us reconnect with who we really are. Recovery is about “being,” not “having.” It's an incredible journey that begins with shattering our false-self. This opens the door to discovering our true spirit. Every spiritual discipline is concerned with “being” not “having.” That's why the 12 Steps work so well in helping those who suffer from all different types of addictions. They facilitate a spiritual experience based on a pedestal of hopelessness as Bill Wilson noted.

In recovery we experience a 180 degree shift in our attitude and perceptions; this is a remarkable personal transformation. Recovery is paradoxical, which means that it is beyond belief. We shift from an obsession with “having more” to a focus on “being,” and living a life guided by spiritual principles. We become concerned with developing character and integrity. This breaks the trance and cures our cultural sickness. We, like Alice in Wonderland, come to realize that what is, isn't, and what isn't, is. What an amazing journey.

Allen Berger, Ph.D. is an international expert in the science of addiction and recovery. He is the author of **12 Stupid Things that Mess Up Recovery**, **12 Smart Things to do When the Booze and Drugs are Gone**, and **12 Hidden Rewards of Making Amends**. His interpretation of the 12 Steps of AA is included in [The Little Book: A Collection of Alternative 12 Steps](#).

Allen's most recent book, published in June of 2021, is **12 Essential Insights for Emotional Sobriety**. It is "a must read for anyone wishing to master the art of living and loving." You can read a number of very positive reviews of the book here on [Amazon](#).

You can learn more about Dr. Berger and his work at his website: www.abphd.com.

