

# Hedonism

Brain research sheds some light on self-destructive addictive behavior, which can seem so incomprehensible. Addictive drugs mimic brain chemicals, which provide pleasurable feelings, and our brain adjusts. As we develop a tolerance, we need more and more drugs to feel O.K. When we don't have our drugs, we feel horrible – and we experience withdrawal. This is addiction.

The brain releases dopamine, the stuff that makes us feel calm and content as a reward for life-sustaining behaviors; for example, when we respond to hunger with eating, or to thirst with drinking, or to sexual desire with sex, or when we try to protect ourselves from a threat with the “fight-or-flight response.” The addictive brain reacts differently to events and drugs. To drugs, our survival system responds with an extreme dopamine surge, which alters our brain chemistry – so we feel the need to get more, and more, and then more. As a result, the “hedonic set point” rises and we experience our needs with life-threatening urgency until all our actions are devoted to an insatiable hunger for pleasure while we may not care that our life is in danger. Avoiding pain and seeking pleasure, which is originally pro-life, becomes essentially pro-drug.

Addicts have an extreme reaction to things. It starts out with “hedonism” – meaning that seeking pleasure and avoiding pain is our most important pursuit. We begin to take drugs because we want to alter the way we feel. On drugs, remember, we evaluate and learn things differently, and so we create a “perceptual bias.” We think we “have to” do things that are socially unacceptable and we'd rather hide that from others, and so we get defensive. When we feel ashamed we attack and blame everybody else, and so we create different experiences and events as we go along. We can't show up for our responsibilities and so our life becomes frustrating, confusing, and scary. We aren't able to follow through with our promises, and people tend to be frustrated with us. We can't deal with it, and we can't face people anymore. When we run out of drugs, we become flooded and overwhelmed with agitation, anxiety, depression, and despair. Therefore, we feel that we must avoid acute withdrawal at any price, and procuring a steady drug supply becomes our first priority. Being preoccupied with obtaining and using drugs, our view of reality becomes skewed and things get chaotic.

At this point we have a lot of problems and chaos to deal with, so we really need to get high. By the time we become desperate to maintain our drug supply at any price, we are living in constant chaos and despair. That's when the drugs usually quit working. Now, no amount of drugs provides the needed relief, and the real-life problems become overwhelming. Joy and happiness are a distant memory, as if from another life. There is no more oblivion from despair. For the “hope to die drug addict,” it's all about survival for no good reason. Some addicts overdose when they can't stand the relentless daily struggle anymore. Some of us surrender and choose recovery...