

Compulsive Behaviors



Last week, I wrote the post “Overspending,” about a recent shopping trip that resulted in my spending too much money and feeling that I had acted in a compulsive manner. Although there were important lessons inherent in that individual experience, it also raised the issue of compulsive behavior in general. This post is geared toward examining compulsive behavior, getting to the root of why we engage in such destructive actions, and looking at what we can do to begin to turn it around.

Compulsiveness Takes Many Forms...

I shared about my shopping and spending issues, but these are far from the only forms of compulsive behaviors with which I’ve struggled. I’ve also engaged in compulsive overeating, dieting, and exercising, and spending too much time working or surfing the internet, among other things. You may have grappled with similar issues, or you may have had problems with drinking, drugs, gambling, sex, or any number of other maladaptive behaviors. It doesn’t matter which of these behaviors has plagued you, the problem is usually rooted in the same causes.

Years ago, I wanted to write a book called “It’s Not About the Food,” about eating disorders and compulsive overeating. Unfortunately, someone else used this brilliant title before I could, but that won’t stop me from sharing my thoughts on the issue. From my early teens until the very recent past, I struggled with pretty much every eating disorder which a person could have. I was anorexic, bulimic, an obsessive exerciser, and a compulsive overeater. I have been seriously underweight, overweight, and every weight in between, yet my pain was always the same. It was never about the number on the scale or what I did or didn’t do around food. It was always about *something else*, and the same is true for all other forms of compulsive behavior.

Escaping Pain

My overeating, under eating, shopping, and other compulsive behaviors have served both as coping mechanisms and means of escape from the pain which I was experiencing in my life. As much pain as these behaviors caused me, and that pain has been intense, the pain which was being masked by my compulsivity was far greater. There was something, or multiple things, which I just didn’t want to look at, so I ate, dieted, or shopped. I would then lament my weight gain, food obsession, or credit card bills instead of dealing with what was *really* wrong in my life.

- What was it that I didn’t want to feel?
- What is it that *you* don’t want to feel that is being buried under your compulsive behaviors?

Getting to the Root of Things

While I can’t possibly know the answer for anyone else, I can share what I believe it was – and is – for me. I have always felt like an outsider and as if I didn’t really “belong.” I never felt like I was “good

enough,” but I thought that if I could somehow be thin enough, maybe I would measure up. Or I thought that if I could be pretty enough (*which relates to the hair obsession which I shared in my last post, “Perspective and Appreciation”*) or dress well enough, maybe I would fit in and be on par with others. That was part of it...

As I’ve shared in previous posts, I’ve long struggled to achieve the societal vision of success in terms of my career. While I know that I am intelligent and capable, I have experienced only limited financial success over the course of my working life. I have difficulty maintaining a passion for a single occupation and thus have switched careers a number of times over the years. Now, at age 43, I feel insecure at my current career status and feel that I should be much farther along the path of success at this point in my life. While I think about this often, I frequently feel stuck and powerless, and I sometimes plummet into feelings of despair and hopelessness when I find that I don’t have the answers.

Comfortably Numb?

What do people do when they feel desperate and hopeless? They often do whatever they can to numb those feelings, using whatever they have at their disposal at the time. I don’t consciously think, “I feel bad, so I think I’ll go shopping and numb myself out,” but that is virtually what I do. The shopping gives me a high that serves to mitigate the lows I was feeling about my career woes or whatever else was troubling me. I know this is true because the items which I buy often sit in my closet for weeks or even months with the tags still on them.

If it really was about my being greedy or truly wanting certain items of clothing, wouldn’t I be rushing to wear them? The feeling I get from shopping and buying clothes is similar to what I used to feel when I would eat a pile of sweets. The pain is numbed and replaced with a high, and I have escaped my negative feelings, albeit only temporarily. That pain returns shortly thereafter and the feelings of guilt and shame resulting from my compulsive behavior add insult to injury and I end up feeling much worse. It’s a vicious cycle and a very difficult one to stop, but there is hope...

The Place of Power

I’ve often heard it said that the place of power is in the space between stimulus and response. Most people merely **react** to what’s going on in their lives; they do what they have always done even when it doesn’t serve them. There is virtually no gap between their feelings (*stimulus*) and their compulsive behavior (*response*). A person feels bad, and then they eat, drink, or do something else to numb the pain. But there is another way -and it starts with awareness... The awareness of your compulsive behavior and what it is costing you is what creates a small space between your negative feelings and what has become an automatic reaction. That small space is the seat of powerful **action**, as opposed to disempowered **reaction**.

An Example & Key Questions to Ask

An example can help to illustrate this important point... Let’s say that I just checked my email and have learned that I didn’t get a much hoped for work project. I feel anxious and that anxiety leads to some

serious worries about my future career prospects, as well as fears that I may never have a “successful career.” Without even thinking about it, I walk to the kitchen and start riffling through the cupboards for something sweet to eat. In the past, I would have stuffed my face with food until I felt numb, but this time, I pause. I ask myself these key questions:

1. Am I **physically** hungry?
2. What do I **really** need in this moment?
3. What **small step** can I take to give myself what I really need?

The pause that I have taken has allowed me to **act** instead of **react**. Even if I still choose to eat, I have removed the automatic nature of this behavior, which is what makes it compulsive. The same questions can be asked when faced with other types of compulsive behavior. Simply construct an alternate first question (i.e. “*Do I really need that pair of shoes?*”) to fit your specific behavior challenge and use the same second and third questions as above.

There is Hope!

I am not promising that you will eliminate your compulsive behavior overnight, but if you are able to pause and allow yourself to examine what’s **really** going on beneath the behavior, you are on the path toward healing. It often takes time to overcome long-term behaviors which have served as effective (albeit self-destructive) coping mechanisms. As I’ve revealed, I still struggle with shopping and spending too much money, but it happens less often and I can more readily “course-correct,” as I did last week. I was able to realize what was going on, turn it around (by returning the unnecessary purchases) and learn from the experience. That is my hope for you as well...