

An eminent psychiatrist looks beneath the surface  
of alcoholism and other addictive behaviors to help

people take control of their lives

# The Heart of Addiction

"This book is a revolutionary advance in understanding how addictions work, and how people can master their own addictive behaviors." —Edward Hallowell, M.D., author of *Driven to Distraction*; *Worry*; and *Connect*

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2002  
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## A NEW WAY OF THINKING

I first noticed the pattern that I discovered underlies addictive behavior when I treated people such as Michael Franklin,\* a man who suffered with alcoholism. Michael had been sober for three months until the day he waited, futilely, two hours for his wife at a downtown street corner. Earlier in the day they had arranged to meet there, but she hadn't shown up. He wasn't worried, because she tended to be forgetful and this had happened before. But he couldn't leave, because she wouldn't know where he was and she didn't have a car. In addition, he had no way to reach her. There was nothing he could do. He paced back and forth. The rush hour crowds around him began to thin. He was trapped, and he hated

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\*To preserve the confidentiality of the people described in this book, all of the examples are composites. In each case all names and identifying characteristics are fictitious.

being trapped. Then, on the far corner, he spotted a cocktail lounge. At that moment, his months of effort to stay sober disappeared from his mind. He walked across the street, went into the bar, and ordered a vodka martini, immediately followed by two more.

The next day when I met with him and he recounted his experience, something surprising emerged. We learned that he began to feel better not when he started to feel the physical effects of the alcohol or when the first sip of martini passed his lips. He had begun to feel better *the moment he decided to walk into the bar*. The drink itself was almost irrelevant!

We soon discovered that the moment Michael *decided* to drink, he had already accomplished something. In making the decision, he had the sense that he had reversed the helplessness he felt while standing outside waiting. He no longer felt helpless, because he knew at that moment that he could, and would, take an action that would make him feel better.

Once Michael realized this, the emotional purpose of his drinking began to make sense. He had felt driven to drink because he had to get out of his trap. Drinking reversed his helplessness by placing *him* in control of how he felt (alcohol and drugs in general are particularly apt for this purpose—altering how one feels is just what they do). But he had actually begun to achieve this goal before he had swallowed a drop. So, although alcohol could change his mood, it was clear that it was the meaning of feeling empowered that was critical here.

I have heard of experiences just like Michael's from an enormous number of people with all kinds of addictive behaviors, and I will offer many detailed examples of this in this book. But for now, I will simply state my conclusion. *Virtually every addictive act is preceded by a feeling of helplessness or powerlessness. Addictive behavior functions to repair this underlying feeling of helplessness. It is able to do this because taking the addictive action (or even deciding to take this action) creates a sense of being empowered, of regaining control—over one's emotional experience and one's life.*

Of course, addictive behavior is actually out of control at the

same time that it serves a deeper purpose of regaining control. This paradox is not unusual in emotional life. It arises because your other goals are temporarily ignored while you are under the sway of a powerful need to act in the moment. So, if you have an addiction, while you are trying to create a *sense* of control, the net effect of this behavior is all too often contrary to what you want in general for yourself. The net effect is to be out of control.

Naturally, we all have to live with a certain degree of helplessness in our lives, and everyone, including you if you suffer with an addiction, puts up with this annoyance much of the time without having to take a drink or perform another addictive act. But what I have found is that for people suffering with addictions, there are quite specific kinds of helplessness, *specific to them as individuals*, that set off critical issues inside them that they find intolerable. Once that happens, the intense need to take an action that reverses the feeling of helplessness takes over. As I will discuss later, a response to act against helplessness is at heart actually quite normal. It is just that when the response is an addiction, the results are typically disastrous.

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The action of addictive behavior to reverse helplessness explains its *purpose*, but it is only one factor in the new way to understand addiction. The second factor is an explanation of the *drive* behind addiction. When anyone is trapped, physically or emotionally, he or she will sooner or later feel a great anger—a rage, really, at being helpless. *It is this rage at helplessness that is the nearly irresistible force that drives addiction.* Michael's case is typical. When he described to me a day later how he was filled with feeling walking into the bar, the intensity of his emotion was palpable. Nobody was going to stand in his way. He had waited helplessly for a long time—and now he was going to act. The rage driving his addiction was evident when he talked about it, and it was certainly present the day before in the fury of his determination as he walked over to that bar.

When Michael understood the purpose behind his seemingly irrational decision to drink, and understood the drive that made drinking so irresistible at that point, he found this to be deeply

meaningful. He had never known any sensible explanation for his drinking. Actually, he didn't think there could be any sensible explanation. As a consequence he had always thought of himself as weak, or selfish, or stupid. But now he had a way to think about not only *why* he felt a compulsion to drink, but why he felt it *when*. He began to be able to predict the occasions that he would be flooded with the urge to drink, because *they were always occasions in which he felt the particular kind of helplessness that was critical to him*. Once he had identified what sorts of things made him feel intolerably helpless, he could predict when he was at risk of drinking.

As I mentioned before, the sorts of problems and concerns that make a person feel helpless in a way that leads to addictive behavior vary from individual to individual. You will find many quite different examples of this throughout the book. I expect these will help you to genuinely understand what leads *you* to feel compelled to repeat addictive behaviors, and to figure out alternate ways to manage this drive—ways that are based on the specific factors that lead to the addiction in your own life.

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There is also a third, critical, aspect of the new way to understand alcoholism and other addictions. It arises from this fact: if the purpose and drive behind addictive behavior—an effort to preserve one's power and control against helplessness—make sense, and if an addictive act is merely a very unfortunate way to express this sensible function, then it follows that there must be a better way to achieve this sensible aim. That is, addictions must be *substitutes* for some other, more useful actions to respond to the helplessness. Indeed, I have found that *every addiction results from a redirection of energy to a substitute or displaced action (usually because another, more direct, action is not considered permissible)*. In Michael's case, for instance, it was understandably not permissible to him to perform the direct action of leaving his wife stranded. So, he displaced his need to reverse his sense of helplessness to the one option—drinking—that had leapt automatically and forcefully to mind. But if he had been fully aware of what was driving this action at that

moment, then instead of having a drink he might have been able to consider other options to reverse his feelings of helplessness and the rage that accompanied them. Indeed, it would have been easy for him to find other solutions, ranging from simply thinking the issue through, to composing an angry harangue to give his wife when she appeared, to buying a newspaper or a book that he wanted to read, to making a phone call to a friend, and so forth. Throughout this book, you will read about a great many examples of the kinds of alternate solutions that people have been able to find, once they know what is driving their addiction.

\* Put another way, knowing that every addiction is a displacement means that there is always another, specific behavior that is being ignored or denied by the substitute behavior of the addictive act, and that this alternative can be found. This idea of looking for the specific alternative is very different from finding general "triggers" to addiction, such as walking into a bar or being with drinking friends. It also differs from the usual advice to distract yourself or keep busy when the urge is upon you. Those efforts often fail because they do not address the individualized issues that are driving the addiction.

A final word about displacement. The fact that all addictions are displacements, or substitutions, is of great importance because without this displacement, addictions would not exist! It is precisely the shifting of the effort to reverse helplessness to another activity, such as drinking, that creates the phenomenon that we call addiction. When actions are taken directly to deal with helplessness, there is no addiction.

\* Note: Be aware that when these alternatives are found the "muscles" supporting them will be unpracticed and developmentally "atrophied"