

There's no place like self

By Ruth Ostrow

IT'S an interesting theory. One I heard at a lecture recently given by a prominent psychologist: that we are all addicts, of some kind or another, chasing the hit of our own personal drug in order to avoid the painful realities of life.

The psychologist said that we used various activities in our lives - good and bad - to keep ourselves occupied, as diversionary tactics, instead of facing up to the loneliness, fear, emptiness, and the great gaping holes and wounds inside of us.

Which came up in conversation recently when I was speaking to a colleague who is recovering from a debilitating illness. This successful businessman, in his prime, was suddenly struck down and bedridden for six months. During that time he had to give up his greatest addiction: work.

"Laying in bed with nothing to do each day gave me the clearest picture of how much I was dependent on my work to make my life meaningful. I had a gruelling routine, was driven by this obsessive need to make money and get ahead," he said.

"Keeping my clients happy was all that mattered to me. Everything else was secondary, including my own health. The doctors told me I had been operating on adrenalin, not energy, and that my nervous system was utterly shot, which is partly how the illness took hold.

"I really thought I was happy. Now I can see I was desperate. I can see how driven I was. How much of myself, my family, my own soul and needs I neglected. The scary thing is I'm not over the addiction. And I know it's going to be difficult to stop myself going back to the same patterns when I recover. But I want to change my life before it's too late."

The psychologist would label this man a workaholic. Addicted to the fight-or-flight hormones of competing, pushing, and to the hit from applause. Unable to live in a state that isn't rich with noise and intensity for fear of the sense of inadequacy, emptiness or mortality that may arise in his head.

But it isn't just passionate, high-powered activities that can be addictive. Another friend was telling me recently about her addiction to gardening. "I used to spend hours in the garden surrounded by beauty, the tiny flowers, the buds. I'd get a sort of trippy feeling, like I was in another world.

"I finally realised that I was pushing everyone away so I could have more time to spend in the garden. I literally had my head in the ground. I couldn't see anything around me. I'd been a workaholic most of my life so I thought this was a good thing to do. But, in essence, I had just traded one addiction in for the other."

Clearly gardening does not produce amphetamine-type substances or pain-killers such as endorphins, the way work or exercise can. But according to those I interviewed for this column, some activities make people feel trippy by releasing feel-good hormones into the brain.

For instance, falling in love. According to a new book by sexologist Gabrielle Morrissey called *Urge* (HarperCollins), the early days of love are marked by the natural release of addictive chemicals including phenylethylamine (PEA) - a substance that makes you feel like you've been hit by a bus.

Then, according to US anthropologist Helen Fisher, as time goes on the speedy chemicals of love - PEA, adrenalin, dopamine and norepinephrine - are replaced by a feel-good opiate called oxytocin (the "cuddle" chemical) which helps people quite literally "settle", and procreate.

The truth is that many of us are hooked on things that numb, distract and excite us, to keep anxiety at bay. Even people who watch excessive television or sports can be putting themselves in a narcotised state, according to the psychologist I heard.

"You can even see it with some mothers. Smother mothers I call them - obsessively twirled around in their children. They live through their kids, craving something, to be seen, validated, forgiven or consumed, so they don't have to face their own unfulfilled lives."

And on this she had a very interesting point to make. Having an addiction is not just classified by the natural or artificial chemicals flowing through your bloodstream. Rather it can be recognised by how out of balance your life becomes in the pursuit of your so-called passion or hobby.

An addiction has the following characteristics: it alters your mood, takes your mind off uncomfortable feelings, is all-consuming, and gives you a reason to neglect other responsibilities or activities.

She said: "Addiction is about not wanting to be in the present. Whether your addiction is a person, passion, drug, or chatting on the telephone/internet, it will habitually lead you away from your centre." The answer she gives to those of us with addictions: "Come home to self. Come inside self and rest."

As she pointed out, there is a frightened, screaming child inside all of us. Only by giving that child attention and love, rather than seducing the host body with endless distractions, can anxiety finally fade.

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