



Unitarian Church of Sharon  
4 Main Street, Sharon, Massachusetts 02067  
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[www.uusharon.org](http://www.uusharon.org)

## **ADDICTION**

This sermon is about addiction: what it is, how it is created, and how one finds recovery.

This is a subject for everyone. Public health studies estimate that 50% of the public are currently being impacted by someone with an addiction. People battling addiction, whether chemical or behavioral, are just like you and me. Indeed, we know them well: they are a family member, relative, friend, neighbor, co-worker, church members – or perhaps our own self. They come from all economic classes, education levels, cultures, religions, or any other criteria we can imagine. The subject of addiction touches all of us.

Addiction is the condition of being physically, emotionally, and spiritually dependent on a chemical substance or destructive behavior. A person is addicted if he or she experiences serious negative consequences from their addiction but cannot stop. They have lost their freedom of choice.

From the beginning of human history, people have used chemicals and repeated behaviors to change their mood. This is normal and natural. If we feel cooped up, we may take a walk. If we feel stressed after a difficult day at work, we may drink a glass of wine. If we feel anxious one evening, we may turn on the television for a diversion. Human life is stressful, and we all need some coping mechanisms to diffuse the tension and pain. We all have our numb numbs!

But how does this turn into an addiction?

There are four basic stages in the development of an addiction. The first stage is experimentation. We discover that alcohol, or a drug, or a certain behavior, can change our mood in a quick and relatively easy manner. It makes us feel better. Whether our discomfort is from stress, anxiety, boredom, social unease, or a sense of helplessness, we discover (for example) that drinking a few beers makes us feel better. We can connect with other people more easily. Or we may find that eating something sweet changes our mood and gets us over a moment of anxiety.

But this is not an addiction, for we remain in control. We choose how much of our numb numb to use. We realize (fairly quickly) when it is too much. We maintain our balance. Our moral and spiritual values remain intact and our relationships remain healthy.

The second stage involves a more frequent use of the substance or behavior. We begin a pattern of regular, controlled use. This still falls within the social norms of appropriateness. We have rules for when and where and how much. We drink two glasses of wine but that's the limit. We use a pill to fall asleep but only under the care of a doctor. We eat too much or too little, but we stop before it becomes a problem. We may gamble occasionally, but we stay within a clear limit of how much money. Our moral and spiritual values remain intact. However, while our guidelines for when, where, and how much remain in place, they are being challenged in a subtle and often unconscious manner.

The third stage is the defining one: the loss of control. Let us consider alcohol as an example. Our dependence on drinking alcohol to sedate our pain or anxiety grows to a point where we rely on it to get by. We pretend to be in control, but in truth, our dependence is now in control. In this stage, a drinker develops more tolerance for alcohol, needing ever increasing amounts to achieve the same result of feeling better. A chemical dependence develops in the brain and in the body. Health begins to deteriorate. Relationships have



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more problems. We start to manipulate people. We lie but pretend, even to our self, that we are not lying. Our moral and spiritual foundation has been replaced by a new one: alcohol.

This third stage also occurs with other dependencies. Food can become an obsession. We may over eat, or under eat, or we may eat and purge the food. The quest for power/money can be an addiction. We become a workaholic -even if it is destroying the rest of our life. Sex can become an addiction. We engage in unhealthy sexual activity. Our attachment to sexual excitement prevents us from finding a suitable partner or keeping the one we have. We may start using cocaine or ecstasy on a regular basis – pretending “it is just recreational”. A dysfunctional relationship may trap us in a cycle of negativity and abuse. We may gamble to excess, losing ever larger amounts.

In all these examples (and many more we could mention) the common element is: we have lost control. The addictive behavior is damaging to our self and others yet we cannot stop doing it. In spiritual terms, the addiction is now our higher power.

There is a significant grey area between stages two and three. Stage two: I use a substance or behavior in a regular way to help me cope with life, but I keep clear boundaries; and Stage three: that substance or behavior has taken over and I am dependent on it. I know that many of us in this room today are in this grey zone. So how can we tell if we have an addiction? How can we tell if we have lost control?

The simplest way to tell is to stop using the substance (alcohol, a drug, over the counter medicine, candy – whatever) or stop the behavior (over working, gambling, sexual obsession) for an extended period of time. I don't mean a few days – I mean a few months. If you are able to stop and continue functioning in a satisfying life then it is not an addiction. But if you cannot stop or your life falls apart then you need to admit you have a dependency issue.

The fourth stage of addiction is when the substance or behavior is our daily obsession. Even though it no longer gives us that old pleasing sedation, we still do it because otherwise the withdrawal is overwhelming to us. There has been a fundamental change in our brain chemistry and the substance is now a physical need. If the substance is withheld, the body can react with excruciating discomfort. Or if the addictive behavior is withheld, our psyche can react with excruciating discomfort. Our moral and spiritual values have been replaced by our addiction. We plan our entire life around its acquisition. Our destructive actions impact, not only our self, but our family and our community.

In particular, a family system is deeply impacted. Spouses may become co-dependent enablers. This means they actually support, in subtle ways their partner's addiction. The personalities of children are affected by the addictions of their parents, resulting in low self esteem. Friends and co-workers have to compensate for the addict's behavior, and often give up on the relationship.

Now, let's talk about recovery.

It is difficult to help a person who is addicted and in denial. Occasionally, an intervention can be effective. The appropriate family and friends are gathered around the person with an addiction. People share their love for them and also their concern. The addiction is named and the consequences described. Sometimes this is enough to jolt a person out of their denial and get them on the path of recovery. This can be especially



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effective if a person is in that grey zone – that is, in the early stages of developing an addictive behavior or dependence.

If a person has had an addiction and been in denial for a long period of time, then often they have to hit bottom. Friends and family need to let them hit bottom. Hitting bottom is when a person jeopardizes or loses their marriage, job, close friends, and reputation. Devastating events rip off the mask of denial, and they collapse under the weight of their personal tragedy. Often people are filled with shame, fear, grief, and confusion. This is an opportunity to seek help. It is an opportunity to start on the road to recovery.

But it is not just the addicted person who needs recovery work: the whole family or sometimes a whole community needs it. Partners and friends need to examine their own enabling behavior and work through their own pain. They need healing from a sense of betrayal. I've known ministers whose alcoholic or sexual addictions caused havoc on an entire church community, and the entire community had to do intentional work on its healing. Recovery work is for everyone – the person with an addiction and everyone around them.

The path to recovery for someone with an addiction may include physical help. A person may need to go into a specialized treatment center. The substance is withdrawn and the body must regain its normalcy. A behavior is withdrawn and the person must learn new behaviors and coping skills. This step is often done under professional care. It is short term.

The long term recovery work is done in the larger community. The best known recovery programs are the 12 Step Programs: Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous, Eating Disorders Anonymous, Gamblers Anonymous, and others. The recovery work is done with group support and a sponsor. Three components are essential: regular attendance at 12 step meetings, a personal sponsor, and working the 12 steps. A 12 Step Program is not the only treatment option, but it is well known and effective. Another option is intensive therapy with a mental health professional who specializes in treating the specific addiction. This counseling may include, at times, other family members. It can include group therapy as well.

When working with a 12 Step Program, or with a specialized counselor, the individual must deal with the issue of control. They must admit that they have lost control: they are powerless before the substance or the behavior. They need a Higher Power, whether it be a human support group, God, or both. They need to make a daily commitment to their recovery. They need to make amends with the persons they have hurt. They need to regain healthy spiritual and moral values.

As a person deepens in recovery, they reach another stage. This stage is marked by humility, understanding, and service.

- Humility: the person is able to admit that they have an addictive weakness which they must deal with for the rest of their life;
- Understanding: the person understands the moral and spiritual principles necessary to live a sober and clean life;
- Service: the person has a desire to help others on the path of recovery.



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I find that persons who reach this stage of recovery are deeply compassionate and caring human beings. They are a great gift to all of us.

Addiction is not only a chemical disease, and an emotional attachment, it is also a spiritual struggle. The spiritual question goes like this: we begin with a healthy set of moral and spiritual values. A Humanist will be grounded in good ethics and the best in the human spirit. A Theist will be grounded in God and good morals. When person moves from stage one (the experimentation stage) into stage two (the regular, controlled use of a substance or behavior), a competing set of values emerges. The spiritual trust in Humanism or Theism now has competition from the chemical substance or dependent behavior which says: "Believe in me. I am the one that can make you feel better." When the loss of control occurs at the third stage, then this competing voice becomes dominant. The addiction becomes the Higher Power and whole new set of selfish behavior becomes operational.

This is why it is so important to be clear about your own moral and spiritual values. The clearer you can be about your spirituality, the less likely it is that an addiction will be able to take over as your higher power. This is one reason why I believe so strongly in the Unitarian movement. The purpose of our church is not to tell you what to believe, but to help you clarify your own deepest beliefs. If you are centered and strong in your faith, then it is less likely you will fall into an addiction.

As a practical step, I would like to see us start an addiction project here at the Unitarian Church of Sharon. This project would create a library of materials for addiction education, provide occasional workshops on addiction, and have a small group of volunteers willing to meet with people in our community to help them find resources, such as 12 step programs. If you would like to help with such a project here please let me know.

In conclusion, there is great hope, for healing from addiction is possible, with wonderful and life affirming results. Indeed, when a person and their family, friends and community do recovery work, everyone becomes more compassionate and caring.

## **Meditation**

I invite you now to join in a time of meditation. After a minute of quiet I will invite you to consider some questions.

- Do you use any substance, or engage in any behavior, which is addictive in nature?
- What would it be like for you to let go of this behavior or substance?
- Who can you turn to for help?
- Do you have a relative, friend, or acquaintance who you suspect suffers from an addiction?
- How could you raise the subject with them?
- How can you take care of yourself in relation to them?
- Who can you turn to for help?

I invite you now just to enjoy this quiet.  
If you want a focus, just feel yourself breathing.  
Life is a precious gift.  
You are a precious gift.      Our meditation continues with music.