

Podcast #20 –REVISED--Addiction and Social
Connection-Podcast –(6 minutes)

Deaths from drug overdoses are reaching levels similar to the HIV epidemic at its peak.

If the war on drugs were a real war, we would have sued for an unconditional surrender long before now.

Heroin and prescription opiates seem to be today's drugs of choice, although addiction is an equal opportunity killer.

What causes addiction? And what is the best treatment for it? Now there is controversy here that I don't want to minimize between those who believe that addiction has a genetic or at least biological cause and those who see it as a result of psychological trauma, and between those who believe in what is called "harm reduction" in which the negative consequences of addiction are ameliorated, for example, with medication, and those who believe that abstinence is the only approach with long term success.

I'm not going to weigh in on this particular debate. I'm going to argue, instead, that we see addiction as a social disease.

But, first, let's dispense with some common misunderstandings.

Most of us believe that addiction stems from the power of the drug itself. In fact, this seems like common sense.

Here's how common sense sees things: drugs like heroin or oxycontin have an intrinsic power over their users who, upon using one of these special substances, come to physiologically crave that drug and fear withdrawing from it so much that they will do anything to get and use it.

In this view, there is an inherent chemical "hook" in various substances.

In the 1980s, experiments that seemed to prove this theory were very popular.

For example, a rat is put in a cage and is given the choice to drink plain water or water laced with cocaine or heroin.

The rat prefers the drug-laced water so much it gives up eating and eventually dies. The drug, in other words, creates the compulsion. The solution? Just say No.

But as journalist Johann Hari has argued, further studies showed that the reality of addiction is quite different.

If you take that rat and put it in an enriched environment—which researchers then did—environments, for example, containing other rats, good food, puzzles to solve and objects that elicit interest — compulsive drug seeking stops almost completely. Think about Put that wannabee addict rat in a enriched environment, and there is no addictive behavior at all!

The lesson is that if we have the opportunity to interact in communities and pursue activities with meaning and purpose, the drug loses its hold on us.

As Hari puts it, "The opposite of addiction isn't abstinence — it's connection."

This conclusion is borne out every day in 12–step recovery groups.

Addicts are welcomed into these groups with unconditional acceptance and actively encouraged to reach out and form relationships with other addicts, efforts that benefit all those involved.

There is a saying in these groups that "the power of one addict helping another is without parallel."

Suffering addicts are not excluded but told to "keep coming back."

Addicts in recovery could have predicted exactly what would happen to the rats who had been isolated in their cages.

Sure, there are likely biological and genetic factors that predispose people toward addiction. But addiction only makes sense in a context...a social context of either isolation or connection.

So, sure, there may be a biological component. And recovery groups certainly view addiction as a disease.

But while such a belief can alleviate the stigma and self-blame of the addict, it is only one part of an overall approach to curing addiction.

The other parts involve providing community and connection, meaningful work — and, sometimes, counseling — for help dealing with the emotional trauma found in addicts. Because trauma is almost always found in the backgrounds of addicts, leading them to try throughout their lives to escape painful feelings and thoughts.

Let's consider what they did about addiction in Portugal.

Portugal used to have the highest heroin addiction rate in Europe.

Reformers in the Portuguese government decided to revolutionize their approach to drug treatment.

In addition to decriminalizing most drugs and funding rehabilitation efforts, they subsidized employers who were willing to hire recovering addicts.

And the rates of heroin use and addiction plummeted.

Meaningful work, in other words, turns out to be one of the prongs of an effective approach to drug treatment.

We need to radically reform our approach to addiction.

While addicts may, indeed, have something wrong with their biology, and while they certainly do hurt and manipulate those around them, the answer does not lie in tough love or punishment.

"For a century now, we have been singing war songs about addicts," Hari says. "We should have been singing love songs to them all along."