

Nothing's Wrong, Something's Right: Finding Root Solutions to Addictions and Bullying

Choose to listen to another human being for "what's right" in them, and acknowledge it. When I do that for someone, I experience love. And that's what I teach kids in schools. -- Scott Gallagher

There are many viewpoints on what causes addictions. Some say it's hereditary. If we have the "addiction gene," we're going to get it. Others say it's our environment. If we grow up in poverty or have an abusive family, we're likely to become addicted.

Yet the reality is that we don't know exactly what causes addictions and other destructive behaviours. Many people have grown up in poor areas or abusive homes and don't become addicts or bullies. The same is true with heredity. Not all people in the same family (or with the same genes) turn out the same way. So while these are valid and contributing factors, the question must be asked: Is there another root cause?

In my last article, I suggested one possibility: that the root of our destructive behaviours lies in our self-destructive thinking. More specifically, for those of us who become addicts or bullies, something happened early in our lives that made us think "something was wrong" with us. From then on, our minds found ways to affirm this belief. We began looking for "what's wrong" in ourselves, and then others and the world, hoping that finding the "answer" would bring us peace. But the result was just the opposite: Focusing on "what's wrong" brought us even more negative thinking and feelings. And to quell the growing pain inside, we turned to behaviours and substances that gave us some kind of temporary relief.

This insight came from my own life experience with addictions, as well as talking with many other addicts and watching people change their destructive habits through personal development training. I wrote about it, not to give "the truth about addictions," but to offer a powerful viewpoint that's helped me, and many others, to recover. Let me share a few more details first, and then describe some of the answers we're finding in my work with kids in schools.

The Power We Give to Our Past

All of us have events in our past that hurt us. It's a part of growing up. However, it's the way we interpret the meaning of those events that can lead us on a path of growth or pain.

What I've noticed with at-risk kids is that all of them have a common problem. It's this: Because of something that happened in their past, they concluded that they were unlovable. And that was how they came to see the world, from the viewpoint that "There is something wrong with me."

My own experience followed this pattern. As a boy, my father once said to me "the day you were born is the day my dreams died." That day I concluded something was wrong with me, and I lived with that interpretation for many years. I also used other experiences to reinforce that belief -- whether it was being laughed at in school because of my clothes, for being the new kid, or being poor -- and shortly thereafter I turned to behaviours like bullying, eating junk food/sugar, or using alcohol or drugs to ease the pain.

We Need Relief -- Any Way We Can Find It

When a child (or adult) decides that something is wrong with them, they begin to evaluate everything in the world through that lens of thinking. "What's wrong with me? What's wrong with me?" is the thought that goes incessantly through our brains. The same thing then gets applied to others: "What's wrong with them? And why are they doing this to me?" That's why addicts are known as "victims," because we have a victim mentality. We are also known for being ferocious complainers and blamers. It wasn't until recently that I realized this was a symptom of the thinking that's habitually driving us inside.

The more we look for "what's wrong" with ourselves and others, the more we believe it, expect it and attract it. Our thinking creates feelings of pain and discomfort inside, and these shape our choices and behaviour. We create situations that reinforce it by "acting

out," creating upset, or behaving in ways that bring us negative treatment. And rarely, if ever, do we experience love, peace or acceptance in our lives. In fact, just the opposite: The pain grows, and we are desperately in need of something to comfort us.

Not finding that comfort within, we seek escape and need to find it in any way we know how. Maybe it's bullying others. Eating junk food, drinking coffee or alcohol, smoking or doing drugs. Whatever the activity, it gives us a sense of "ease and comfort" -- a temporary distraction from our own pain -- but it is short lived. So we need to do it even more, and eventually find ourselves becoming "addicted" to whatever the behaviour is.

I believe that, ultimately, every bully and every person who's addicted, or who harms themselves or others, first made the decision that something was wrong with them. That they were therefore inferior to other people. And then they carried their "tiny little secret" into the world, a secret that they -- or we (because I'm one of them) -- don't want to tell anyone else.

Seeing others as superior and feeling inferior ourselves, we then do what we can to feel better. We bully, or outperform, others to feel superior. We do drugs to get high, use video games to make us feel exhilarated, or cut ourselves to 'get out of here' (at least temporarily) -- anything to avoid the feelings and thoughts that we're inferior to everyone else on the planet.

That's the root problem I discovered in my life and my work with addicts. If I could sum it up in three sentences, it would be this: We think that there's something wrong with us and we're inferior to others. Those thoughts create discomfort and painful feelings. And we seek escape from those thoughts and feelings, in any way we know how.

Is There Another Way to Feel Better?

If this is a major root cause of our destructive behaviours, then the root solution becomes very, very obvious. It too lies in our thinking. That's why the program I teach in schools is about working with kids to develop a new habit of thought. That is, to begin thinking about "What's right with me?"

To some that might sound kind of naive or simplistic. But let me suggest that it's deceptively simple, and definitely not as easy as it sounds. In fact, this new habit is a real challenge for many of us. Just think about it: How many of us look for what's wrong in ourselves, someone else, or in the world around us? How many of us blame, criticize, or try to correct, fix or motivate others? It's a habit pattern we've developed and strengthened over many years -- and shifting or breaking out of is easier said than done.

Simple Actions that Get Results

When I go into a school, I give an assembly presentation, followed by workshops for kids who have serious habits they want to change. After that, these kids participate in a 28-day program with a weekly group meeting (supervised by adult facilitators) and daily contact with a buddy they've been assigned.

The program is based on the belief that we can accomplish miracles that we'd normally never be able to accomplish, if we do it in a group. The buddy structure is key to this. Kids are instructed to talk to their buddy for 28 days in a row, for less than five minutes each time. And one of the questions they ask each other is: "What is one thing you like about your life -- or you could like about your life, if you really wanted to?"

For many of these kids, that's a tough question to answer. I say to them, "Many of you could probably give me a hundred things you DON'T like about your life," and everyone starts nodding their head in agreement. That would be easy. But initially coming up with even one good thing is hard.

And that's the reason we do it: To help kids interrupt the normal "default" pattern of their thoughts and feelings. Most of them have pretty negative thoughts in their heads -- complaining, blaming and criticizing themselves, and others. What we want to do is consciously shift that pattern by having them ask themselves (and each other) a question that will have them focus on something that would make them feel a little bit better. It's one very small step towards looking at and feeling "what's right?" about their lives. And that's the beginning of change...

No Fixing or Motivating

Another thing we do is instruct kids not to give advice, fix, problem solve or motivate their buddies or others in the group. That too may sound a bit strange, but here's the logic.

These kids have had people trying to "fix them" for years. They know that most mean well -- like their parents, counselors, teachers and friends -- when they try to help, give advice or encourage them. Yet the kids I talk to all admit that whenever someone does that, they HATE it.

So why is that? Just think of what lies behind it. When we try to give a kid advice or help fix their problem, we're actually doing it from the perception that there's something wrong with them! It's like pushing a button inside -- that tender spot where they believe "something's wrong" with them -- that THEY are trying to avoid at any cost.

Not only does our well-meaning behaviour not work (and we've all seen that). It actually reinforces the problem in the people we're trying to help. What's more, it can actually "motivate" them to do more. When people say, for example, "You know what? You've really got to stop smoking. I really care about you and you might get cancer," even though they mean well, many kids admit that it actually makes them want to smoke more. Why? Because it focuses them again on their problem, on thinking about what they don't want. The more they focus on that, the more they end up doing it -- to avoid the thoughts and feelings that they're bad or wrong.

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Shift from Seeing "Something's Wrong" to "Something's Right"

A third part of the program that's really powerful -- it's what I call the fundamental or "prime directive" -- is telling kids: "No matter what your buddy does, no matter what other kids do, don't focus on what they did 'wrong.' Focus on what they did 'right.' "

For example, say their buddy says he is going to do something and he doesn't. The natural thought process we have is: "Oh, they messed up. There's something wrong here." Our natural reaction is then to try and fix it. So what we teach kids is that as soon as they notice their mind going down that path, they need to interrupt it -- and stop it.

What I say to them is this: "When you focus on what's wrong with someone else, it's only causing YOU to have bad feelings and discomfort inside. That's what's driving you to want relief and comfort. So, as soon as you notice your mind focusing on what's wrong, say to yourself -- and this is really important -- say to yourself: 'Nothing's wrong.'" "But that's crazy," they say. "They did do something wrong. They didn't do what they promised."

"But that's not what I want you to focus on," I tell them. Say to yourself: "Nothing's wrong. I know it looks like there's something wrong. But there isn't anything wrong. Nothing's wrong." Then pause, for as long as you need to, and say, "Something's right." Sometimes you may have to say it a few times -- "Something's right. Something's right" -- because we're so committed in our mind that when something is wrong, it needs to be fixed. So say it until you feel it. "Something's right. Something's right. Okay (sigh) I do believe something's right."

"Then comes the next question. Ask yourself, "What's right? What's right here?" It may take a few moments, but you will come up with an answer. "Hey, what's right is that my buddy just told me the truth! He could have lied, but he told me the truth." Then ask yourself, "What else is right here?" "Hey, my buddy didn't skip. He showed up or he called me." Then acknowledge your buddy for that. You could say, "Thank you for staying in the program. Or thanks for being my buddy. Thanks for not making yourself wrong; or if you did, thanks for just being on this call anyway. I know the courage it must have taken." As the ideas begin to come, you will start to feel better about them, and yourself."

It sounds simple. But for those of us used to habitually thinking and seeing what's wrong, it is VERY difficult. It's also very powerful. It trains kids to see themselves and others differently. It generates good feelings for them, which is especially important. And it gives them practice at changing their root thought habits, which leads them in the direction of becoming free.

Imagine What Life Would Be Like

There's one more approach I use that I'd like to mention here. Sometimes I say to kids: "I want you to imagine -- what would your life be like if your parents never ever pointed out anything that you did wrong? I know this would never happen; I'm just talking fantasy here. But I want you to imagine it. How do you think your life might be different if your parents never focused on or told you that you did something wrong? What if all they did was, any time they saw you do something right, they pointed it out and acknowledged you for it?"

What then happens is this profound moment. The kids are silent, and their mouths drop open -- because it's just so beyond their comprehension. It's almost unimaginable.

Then I say, "It would be awesome, right?" "Yeah!" they respond. "It would be awesome!" "Okay, well if that's the kind of life you want, I'm going to ask you to start practising that. You know that you can't change anybody, right? So YOU be the change you'd like to see. Start being that -- and you will start getting the benefits of treating other people that way."

Not Just the Kids, but Adults Too

Sometimes after my workshop, the adult facilitators who are in the workshops come up and challenge me. They try to fight the idea I've just described -- of not pointing out what's wrong or correcting kids for "bad" behaviour -- because it's so hard for them to imagine too. And here's what I say to them: "Don't get me wrong. I'm NOT saying that this is "the answer," or it's what parents and teachers should always do. What I'm demonstrating is how hard it is even to think this way, and to shift from seeing 'something's wrong' to 'something's right.'"

I also use this example to convey an important truth: "To the extent that you (the adults) really develop this muscle of seeing 'what's right' is the extent to which your kids are going to stay in the program. Why? Because as teachers/adults, you are the role models. You set the tone and the energy. If you're a complainer and a blamer, that's what kids will see. If you're addicted to things, kids will feel that. So you have to do the program too, as equals with the kids. That doesn't mean you have to be perfect. You just have to be willing to grow and practice the way they do."

So What Can YOU Do, Right Now?

If you're a teacher or educator who's reading this, maybe you'll never bring me into your school. So what can you take away from this article to help your kids who are most at-risk? How can you help develop their "what's right" muscle -- that new way of thinking that will help them start feeling better today?

Start by focusing on what's right with them. Intentionally don't look at them like there's something wrong that needs to be fixed. Look for where they're doing something right and only give energy to that. Because whatever you acknowledge gets repeated. If you focus on what's wrong in your kids, guess what? That's what you'll get. The reverse is also true. If you acknowledge what's right in them, that's what you'll start seeing repeated.

That is what we're finding in schools using our Healthy Habits program. Teachers are consistently reporting improvements -- sometimes even within just a week -- where kids who were sad and depressed are showing higher self esteem, better energy, and seeming happier. They're connecting more with other kids. They're becoming more trusting and accountable. And their "bad" behaviours are beginning to decline.

They're Actually Looking for Love

As I said at the start, there are many different views on what causes addictions. However, most experts agree that one key reason why people become addicts is that they are trying to find love. It's often said this way: "Addicts are people who have the inability to give or receive love."

For those of us who become bullies or addicts, our experience as kids is that we didn't get much love. Feeling its absence, we try to get that feeling (or something that resembles it) in another way. So we turn to substances and behaviours to "replace" the love that wasn't there.

In my workshops, I tell kids: "If you grew up in a family where you actually received all the love you needed, you'd be the one who's 'dysfunctional' or different!" And everybody starts to laugh, because they know it's true. The reality is, our parents didn't get the love that they ideally wanted. They experienced problems like abuse as well, maybe worse than we've had. And so did their parents. So ALL parents are dealing with life the best that they can. The truth is, they love (or loved) us -- and, they too were incapable of loving fully.

Ultimately what my program is about is giving kids the love that they've never had or experienced before. What I learned from my experiences at home and with addictions is that, all that time, I was really looking for love. Looking for love in a crack pipe; in being a bully, an alcoholic or a sex addict. I was expecting love to come from "out there" -- from my parents, my teachers, friends, wife or girlfriends. But what I discovered is that love was something that was in me to give, and that I just needed a way to do it. That's why I help others today. Because it gives me such profound experiences of love that I can barely describe them. And it's also helped keep me "clean and sober" when all the odds said I wouldn't be.

Change is Hard for Adults Too

What I've noticed in myself is that any time I consciously listen to someone, my mind starts to criticize and complain. Yup, my "default" habit of thinking is just like everybody else's. I focus on what's wrong, and it takes effort for me to notice it, stop it, and intentionally ask myself "What's right" about what others are saying. However, when I make that shift, I start to really listen and get fascinated by what they're talking about.

I call it active listening: Choosing to listen to another human being for what's right in them, and then acknowledging it. When I do that for someone, I experience love. And that's what I now teach kids. But there's also another side to that. When someone else does that for me, I also experience love. So I get the experience either way -- by actively listening, or by having someone else do that with me.

What I share with the adults who facilitate the program is this: Kids are looking up to you. And to the degree that you practise my "prime directive" -- Nothing's wrong. Something's right. Asking "what's right?" and acknowledging it -- is the degree to which these kids will experience the love they've never had in their entire lives. They will get how committed you are to them, they'll feel better inside, and they will not leave the program. Yes they might screw up and break their word -- just like all human beings do -- but they won't quit. Because they know that by coming here, they won't get judged. They'll get loved.

So that's what I would also say to you. This is the biggest contribution you can make to your at-risk kids, whatever behaviours they do. Listen to them for who they are, and who you know they want to be. See them that way. Listen to them actively for what's right and what's great about them. And when you see it, acknowledge it. Because when you acknowledge it, they're going to repeat that behaviour. And you'll both get more of what you really want. For me, the answer to all addictions is love. And this is one, very practical way you can do it.