

Understanding Addiction

What Happened to Me

One of the greatest barriers to recovery is shame. Many people who struggle with addiction eventually begin to believe there is something fundamentally wrong with them. They stop saying, "I have an addiction," and begin saying, "I am an addict." The difference may seem small, but it changes how a person views themselves. One describes a problem that can be addressed. The other becomes an identity.

If we are going to understand addiction, we must begin by asking a different question. Instead of asking, "What's wrong with me?" we should ask, "What happened to me?"

This question is not an attempt to excuse addiction or avoid responsibility. Personal responsibility remains essential for recovery. Every person must eventually own their choices and the consequences those choices create. At the same time, understanding why addiction developed allows us to replace shame with insight. We cannot effectively change what we refuse to understand.

Most addictions begin because they solve a problem.

For some people, alcohol quiets anxiety. For others, pornography provides escape from loneliness or rejection. Gambling creates excitement where life feels empty. Food comforts emotional pain. Drugs numb grief. Shopping temporarily fills feelings of inadequacy. Whatever the addiction may be, it often begins as an attempt to manage emotional discomfort.

In the beginning, the addiction appears to work. It brings temporary relief, distraction, or pleasure. The brain quickly learns this connection. When stress, sadness, fear, shame, or loneliness returns, the mind remembers what provided relief before. Over time, reaching for the addiction becomes less of a decision and more of an automatic response.

This is one reason addiction feels so confusing. The very thing that once seemed to help eventually becomes the source of greater pain. What began as a solution slowly becomes another problem that requires even more relief.

The deeper issue, however, is not simply the addictive behavior. The deeper issue is where we place our trust.

Healthy people gradually learn to trust their own character, values, relationships, and abilities. They discover that they can experience difficult emotions, solve problems, ask for help, and recover from disappointment. Confidence grows because they repeatedly experience themselves as capable.

Addiction changes that process.

Instead of learning to trust ourselves, we begin trusting something outside of ourselves. The substance, behavior, or experience becomes the place we turn for comfort, confidence, relief, distraction, or emotional regulation. Without realizing it, our confidence slowly shifts away from our own developing character and toward the addiction.

This is why addiction affects identity so deeply.

The addiction begins making promises that only healthy growth can fulfill. It promises peace, acceptance, pleasure, confidence, escape, or relief. At first those promises appear believable because they provide immediate results. Yet they never strengthen the person using them. Instead, they quietly weaken the belief that "I can face life without this."

Every time the addiction becomes the answer, our confidence in ourselves decreases a little more. Eventually many people begin to wonder if they are capable of living without it at all.

This is where shame often enters the story.

After repeated failures, many people stop believing they are trustworthy. They question their character, their value, and their future. They become discouraged, not only because they continue using, but because they no longer recognize the person they hoped to become.

Yet this is not the end of the story.

Recovery is not simply learning to stop using an addictive behavior. Recovery is learning to trust yourself again.

That trust is not rebuilt through promises alone. It grows through evidence. Each healthy choice becomes evidence that you can tolerate discomfort. Each honest conversation becomes evidence that you can face reality. Each day of integrity becomes evidence that your character is growing stronger than your cravings.

Recovery is not about becoming perfect. It is about becoming trustworthy.

As confidence returns, the addiction loses much of the power it once held. Not because temptation completely disappears, but because your identity is no longer built upon the addiction. You begin trusting your values more than your impulses. You begin believing your future more than your fear. You discover that the strength you were searching for was never found inside the addiction. It was developed inside you as you learned to live with integrity.

Understanding addiction changes the question from, "What is wrong with me?" to "What happened to me?" Recovery changes the next question from, "Can I stop?" to "Who am I becoming?"

That may be the most important question of all.

Worksheet

Understanding Addiction: What Happened to Me?

Reflection

Before beginning this worksheet, remember one important truth:

Understanding why an addiction developed does not excuse it. It simply gives you a better place to begin healing.

Looking Back

Instead of asking, "What is wrong with me?" spend a few minutes answering these questions honestly.

When did my addictive behavior first begin?

What was happening in my life during that season?

What emotions was the addiction helping me avoid or manage?

- ☐ Anxiety
- ☐ Loneliness
- ☐ Shame
- ☐ Fear
- ☐ Rejection
- ☐ Anger
- ☐ Depression
- ☐ Stress

- ☐ Boredom
- ☐ Grief
- ☐ Other _____

How did the addiction seem to help me in the beginning?

What Was It Promising Me?

Every addiction makes promises.

Complete the sentences below.

"When I used my addiction, I usually hoped I would feel..."

"I believed it would give me..."

"The problem it seemed to solve was..."

Looking at Trust

Circle the statements that describe your experience.

When life became difficult, I trusted... My own ability to cope.

The addiction to help me feel better. Friends or family.

Isolation. Prayer or faith. Avoidance.

Other _____

How has my trust gradually shifted over the years?

Identity Check

Complete these sentences honestly.

My addiction has caused me to believe...

"I am..."

"I'll probably always..."

"I can never..."

Now ask yourself:

Are these facts? Or are they conclusions I have reached after repeated discouragement?

Building a New Story

Every healthy decision becomes evidence of a new identity.

List five examples, no matter how small, that show you are capable of making healthy choices.

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

Looking Forward

Who do I want to become over the next year? Not simply what do I want to stop doing.

Who do I want to become?

What character qualities would describe that person?

What is one decision I can make this week that would be evidence I am becoming that person?

Final Reflection

Read these statements slowly.

- "I am more than my worst decision."
- "My addiction explains part of my story, but it does not define my future."
- "I cannot change yesterday, but I can become someone different today."
- "My recovery is not simply about quitting. It is about becoming a person of integrity."

Thought for the Week

Recovery begins the moment you stop asking, "What's wrong with me?" and begin asking, "Who do I want to become?"