

PROMOTING CLIENT STRENGTH THROUGH POSITIVE ADDICTION

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Abstract

Under certain conditions self-improvement activities like running or meditating can become addictive. This article contends that such addictions confer strength to the individual and promote effective living; therefore, they must be considered "positive". The article traces the development of the concept of positive addiction (PA) and suggests that the construct will prove very useful to the counsellor who wishes to teach his or her clients how to help themselves grow stronger.

Résumé

Des activités aptes à produire une amélioration chez soi, telles que courir et méditer, peuvent devenir habituelles sous certaines conditions. Cet article soutient que de telles habitudes confèrent de la force et nous encouragent à vivre de façon efficace. Ceci nous conduit à considérer de telles habitudes comme étant positives. Cet article trace la genèse du concept de l' "addiction positive" (PA) et suggère que ce concept s'avérera très utile au conseiller qui désire amener ses clients à pouvoir vivre plus résolument.

One of the problems which I have attempted to solve as a psychiatrist has been how to teach people to help themselves grow stronger. The stronger we are the better able we are to handle the stresses of life and the happier we are likely to be. People do badly because they are not strong enough to get what they want from life, and lacking strength settle for painful compromises which are loosely but inaccurately labeled mental illness. To counteract maladaptive compromise processes, the task of the counsellor not only is to help his or her clients grow stronger but also to teach them ways in which they can do so on their own. Positive addiction (Glasser, 1976) provides an effective way for most people to help themselves grow stronger. As I will explain shortly, PA (positive addiction) doesn't require anyone else. It doesn't even exist in the active presence of others but is, in fact, the only truly self-help practice of which I know.

I submit that the concepts of positive addiction are especially useful to those counsellors who wish to teach their clients something that will directly help them to help themselves. I would emphasize at the outset, however, that positive addictions supplement and in no way replace the usual counselling relationship. Since we can rarely pinpoint exactly what helps our clients to grow, I would further suggest that the more we can broaden our approach and the more useful things we can teach to our clients the more effective we are likely to be.

The idea of positive addiction came to me while I was reading *The Boys of Summer* (Kahn, 1971). That

book is about baseball players, what they were like in the heyday and what happens to them after they quit playing. The team described was the championship Brooklyn Dodgers of 1953. One of the players interviewed long after he had finished playing was George Schuba. Kahn (1971) had remembered that Schuba was taciturn so in order to start a conversation said, "George, what I have always liked about you was your great natural swing." Schuba then explained that when he was 16 years of age, he wanted more than anything to become a major league ball player. He knew he could field but he had to learn how to hit. He had noticed that good hitters had great swings so he decided to take a weighted bat to the basement of his house and swing it at a piece of string marked with knots in the strike zone. He did this every day for the next 21 years — 600 times a day.

When I read this account, something snapped inside of me. I just couldn't imagine how anyone could show so much discipline for so long. Then I got what initially seemed to be a wild idea to explain Schuba's self-discipline. He had become *addicted* to swinging a bat! If indeed he were addicted to the process we might predict that when he attempted to give it up he would suffer so much withdrawal that he would be compelled to continue. Although Schuba doesn't like the idea of addiction, he does agree that he had a very strong habit. He can remember swinging the bat only 200 or 300 times on several occasions, going to bed, then tossing and turning

unable to sleep until he got up, went to the basement and swung it the remaining 200 or 300 times to complete the 600.

I reasoned that if Schuba had become addicted, then surely we must re-examine the whole concept of addiction as a negative process because there is nothing about swinging a bat that must be considered negative. Moreover, if Schuba's addiction had helped him to the major leagues, then obviously it must be considered positive, so I began to outline the criterial attributes of positive addiction. A positive addiction apparently, is something people believe in doing, choose to do, and do for themselves. It is something which is done on a regular basis and which requires considerable discipline. It is also something which people get hooked into doing so that they experience withdrawal symptoms if they stop. Unlike the common weakening and therefore negative addictions like alcoholism, drug abuse, gambling and overeating, Schuba's was a positive addiction because it made him stronger.

While developing the concept of positive addiction, I thought of an experience I had had several years before. A friend of mine had told me that his sons were doing badly in college but suddenly began to do better. They had started meditating, having learned transcendental meditation from the Maharishi. They spent 15 or 20 minutes twice a day in meditation and from this their lives seemed to have changed for the better. When I talked to my friend's sons about meditation they took me to hear the Maharishi at UCLA. My initial reaction was that meditation seemed to be an incredibly boring practice. They insisted that it wasn't, so now much later while thinking about Schuba, I came to the conclusion that they too had become addicted to a daily mental discipline which was in a sense similar to the physical discipline of swinging a bat. With this in mind it seemed to me that a positive addiction could be mental or physical as long as it satisfied the criteria previously outlined.

As I began to talk to more and more people about positive addiction, I found that they could describe a wide variety of activities, both physical and mental to which they thought they were positively addicted. I became convinced of the validity of the concept, after a discussion with a young monk about 30 years of age who told me that he was addicted to chanting. Each day for an hour he chanted the psalms. When I asked how this helped him, he related that at the age of 18 he was an alcoholic. He drank heavily for 6 or 7 more years and then at age 25 re-evaluated his life. He had concluded that he was killing himself with drink so desperately decided to chant in an effort to help himself. He could not explain why he had chosen chanting but reported that gradually he lost his desire

to drink. Within six months he believed he was as firmly hooked to chanting as he had been to drinking, but now his whole life had changed for the better. He began to study to become a monk, something he had always wanted to be and now is. Obviously, positive addiction had done a great deal for him, even to the point of quenching a negative addiction. His positive addiction was confirmed when he explained that if he didn't chant he suffered the same tortures, the same pains, discomforts, upsets, both physical and mental, that he had previously suffered when he had unsuccessfully attempted to stop drinking.

I now was firmly convinced that positive addiction was an important idea, that it was open to anyone who had the discipline to try it, that somehow or other it could help people to become a great deal stronger and that this strength could be used anywhere in their lives. I began to hear stories from many people claiming that they were positively addicted to a variety of activities such as swimming, hiking, bike riding, yoga, Zen, knitting, crocheting, hunting, fishing, skiing, rowing, playing a musical instrument, singing, dancing, and many more. Some of these I believe were addictions, some of them I believe were not.

After establishing the criteria for a positive addiction I had two further questions to answer: (1) what made an activity addicting, and (2) what was there about a positive addiction that appears to confer strength to the person. While talking in Toronto later that year a man stood up and said he was addicted to running. I had never previously heard running described as a positive addiction, although I now believe it to be the most addicting activity of all. The speaker proceeded to describe his addiction to running — he ran an hour every day. He said he suffered tremendous pain (physical and mental) if he didn't run. He told how he lost 55 pounds, had given up smoking, and now gets along better with everyone. Then, he volunteered that there was only one problem with running, it was dangerous. When asked to explain, he said something happens when you run, you go into a kind of transcendental state of mind where you don't attend to things as well as you might. In this state you tend to cross streets against the light and run in the face of traffic. I was immediately intrigued by this state of mind and the word he used to describe it, transcendental, as if his mind "spins out." Now, after interviewing many positive addicts, most of whom were runners or meditators, I believe that this state of mind is necessary for an activity to become positively addicting. Unless you get into this transcendent, spun out, detached, altered state of consciousness, the activity isn't addicting. It is leaving one's mind alone to do its own thing that seems to be necessary for

positive addiction. Like negative addiction, the PA state of mind feels extremely good, but unlike negative addiction which produces a good feeling but no strength, positive addiction produces both the feeling and the strength. The data which I have gathered suggests that to get into this PA state of mind one has to accept one's self completely as one engages in the positively addicting activity. It is the complete acceptance of a routine, usually rhythmic activity that allows the mind to spin out and enter, naturally on its own, an altered state of consciousness. When this altered state of consciousness occurs frequently enough, the person becomes addicted to the activity.

The second problem which I have confronted is how this state of consciousness confers strength to the individual. It seems that something electrically or biochemically goes on in the brain during the PA state of mind which causes it to rejuvenate or to reach a condition of confident readiness, thus enabling us to successfully attack the problems of life as they come along. The recent work of E. Roy John (1976) on brain functioning (see also Goleman, 1976) suggests that the brain, under certain circumstances, can actually grow stronger and I believe that the PA state of mind may be one of these circumstances.

The implications of positive addiction are wide. Anyone can get involved in an activity that he or she believes in. If you get involved in it on a regular basis, if you are non-self-critical in the process and if your mind begins to spin out or transcend, you will eventually become addicted to the activity. Once addicted you will grow stronger, and this strength is available to be used in any way you wish to use it to make your life better. Hopefully, then, the concept of positive addiction will prove useful to the counsellor in promoting the strength and therefore the positive growth of his or her clients.

References

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