

Addictive personality



When a tendency to overindulge becomes an addiction, there can be many factors at play. One thing we can't blame (however tempting) is our personality, says behavioural addiction expert Dr Mark Griffiths

CHRISTMAS IS TYPICALLY A TIME FOR EXCESS. Excessive eating. Excessive drinking. Excessive smoking. But it doesn't stop there. Individuals often say they're 'addicted' as an excuse for overindulging in all sorts of things. Why does it happen? In the 30 years I've been carrying out research into addiction, the question I've been asked the most is whether there really is such a thing as an 'addictive personality'.

It would be a neat answer

It's tempting to believe in the concept of addictive personality when you consider that some people are addicted to more than one substance or activity at a time (known as 'cross addiction'). Also, on giving up one addiction, some people become addicted to another (known as 'reciprocity'). But in all the scientific studies I've ever read, I've never come across a good definition. Some psychologists have argued it's a *consequence* of addiction, rather than a pre-existing trait, but that doesn't help our understanding of how and why individuals become addicted.

If addictive personality does exist, the trait must precede the initial signs of addiction or be a direct and lasting feature of the addiction. Most importantly, it has to be discriminative (that is, it has to be predictive of addiction and addiction alone). No scientific study has ever demonstrated this.

Association, not prediction

I have argued therefore that addictive personality simply doesn't exist. This doesn't mean that personality factors aren't important in how and why some people develop addictions. They clearly are. For instance, studies examining personality and addiction consistently report that addictive behaviours are



‘Addiction can be the result of emotional or social reasons’

correlated with high levels of neuroticism (having high mental instability such as depression and high anxiety) and low levels of conscientiousness (being disorderly, uncareful, and not very well organised). However, I've come across people who are highly neurotic and unconscientious without being addicted to anything. Therefore, while these personality traits are associated with addiction, they don't predict it.

The many faces of addiction

Scientific research has also shown that within most addictions there appear to be more than one sub-type of addict. For instance, some have genetic and biological reasons that underpin their addiction; some may have psychological or emotional problems; and others may have an addiction because of more social reasons (such as wanting to engage in activities their family or friends engage in). If this is the case – and I believe it is – this is a problem for the idea of 'addictive personality', which is a one-size-fits-all approach.

There's now a lot of scientific evidence

that the causes of addiction are what we psychologists call 'biopsychosocial' (biology plus psychology plus social influences). In addition, situational determinants (eg, accessibility to the drug/behaviour, advertising and marketing) and structural determinants (eg, toxicity of a specific drug, game speed in gambling) can also be influential in how and why people develop problematic and addictive behaviours.

Another problem with using this label as an explanation for why individuals develop addictions is that by doing so we absolve an individual's responsibility of developing an addiction and put the onus on others in treating it. Ultimately, all addicts have to take some responsibility in the development of their problematic behaviour and they have to take some ownership for overcoming their addiction.

One thing doesn't lead to another...

The scientific evidence shows that not every addict has a personality disorder, and not every person with a personality disorder has an addiction. Many people use the term 'addiction' to justify behaviours such as drinking too much or being sexually unfaithful. This is what psychologists call a 'functional attribution' (simply an excuse to justify socially unacceptable behaviour). There's no personality trait that guarantees an individual will develop an addiction and, in my view, addictive personality is a complete myth.

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