

# Addictions

## Underlying Causes and Recovery Options

by Rabbi Yechezkel Spanglet, C.A.S.A.P.

**A**ddiction is not a new phenomenon. However, in our times it has enlarged its parameters with ramifications effecting every segment of society. The increase of internet/lust addiction in recent years has wreaked havoc in the Orthodox community and threatened the very core of the sanctity of the Jewish people.

Our essay will revolve around underlying causes of addiction in general, treatment options, explore more specifically the onslaught of computer/internet/lust attachments and how to meet the challenges of these awesome threats.

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Addiction can be defined as a psychological or physical state of dependency to a substance or pattern of compulsive use which is characterized by tolerance, craving and withdrawal syndrome when abuse is interrupted.<sup>1</sup>

The following categories yield the major roots of addictive behavior: 1) physiological; 2) dispositional; 3) emotional; 4) sociological; and 5) spiritual.

Physiological refers to the genetic, organic constitution of the human being when he was born. For example, a person at birth may possess lower than normal levels of dopamine, a chemical released from the brain in conjunction

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Rabbi Yechezkel Spanglet received his international addiction counseling license in 2002 after receiving his BA in Psychology. He is also trained in Cognitive Behavioral Therapy and serves as a Chinuch consultant. He resides with his family in Yerushalayim.  
1. Mcgraw Hill, *Concise Dictionary of Modern Medicine*, 2002 Mcgraw Hilll Companies.

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with experiencing pleasure. Other examples are developmental, organic deficiencies or brain damage as from birth.

The following factors are fundamentally dispositional:

1) An individual's sensitivity to unpleasant feelings and circumstances. 2) Deficient motivation to control behavior, i.e. the pull towards instant gratification. 3) Impulsivity. 4) Excitement seeking and low frustration tolerance for boredom. 5) Relatively diminished future time perspectives (attention on the here and now). 6) Concentration on cravings rather than consequences.<sup>2</sup>

A frequent dispositional risk component is low frustration tolerance. Such a person feels stress when circumstances do not go smoothly; any hitch in the desired consequences causes overreaction and anxiety. Blame is a common reaction to low frustration tolerance.

The following are examples of what might pass through the mind or lips of such an individual: "Those people should be blamed and punished for giving me such a hard time. There are always obstacles in my path that stress me out."

The emotional components involve feelings and reactions which fundamentally interact with the all of the cause and effect factors of addiction.

Perfectionism is a common tendency that can produce negative emotional consequences. If things don't go as perfectly as one wishes or one's aspirations are being blocked, it is considered a calamity. Such people are often extremely demanding of others and of themselves. Many feel uneasy, unsettled and irritable.

Some common examples are:

"Since I didn't complete my list of 20 chores (I only did 19), I feel unaccomplished." Or, "Why can't I understand every *sugya* in *Shas*?"

In accordance with the stress, frustration and anxiety precipitated from the tendencies mentioned above, a vicious cycle can begin. To compensate for the emotional trauma one may self-medicate or engage in pleasure seeking activities. Subsequently, occupational, social, religious and familial issues are exacerbated leading to further anxiety and stress. Pleasurable activities become compulsive, alcohol intake becomes uncontrollable, and the victim becomes entrapped in the quicksand of addiction—and the cycle continues.

Sociological factors can engender or reduce the potential toward addictions. Four major areas include: 1) family 2) school 3) peers and 4) community.<sup>3</sup>

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2. Dr. Mordechai Blumenfeld, Research Information, Workshop 2002.

3. Dr. Sanford Lando, Nefesh Conference, Feb. 2012.

## Family

A risk factor is something in a young person's environment that increases the likelihood of health and behavior problems. Research indicates that the greater the number of risk factors to which an individual is exposed, the greater the individual's risk of developing problems.<sup>4</sup>

For a child to develop into a non-risk, stable, goal-oriented individual, a healthy, qualitative upbringing is required. Warmth, consistency, undivided attention and unconditional love are amongst the many behaviors of by parents which yield healthy life attitudes and high self-esteem.

Rabeinu Yona comments "The core foundation—service [of *Hashem*] is a person's recognition of his self worth and being cognizant of his strength and virtues."<sup>5</sup> High self-esteem is so important in emotional development that Dr. Avraham Twersky adds

that the overwhelming number of psychological and/or emotional problems which afflict people can be traced to a single underlying cause—lack of self-esteem.

This term refers to a distorted self-perception whereby a person sees himself as less than he is. He perceives himself as lacking in value and competence. Ironically *ga'ava* (haughtiness, self-pride) is really a desperate psychological defense whereby a person tends to escape from feelings of lack of self-worth which cause him to assume himself to be superior to everyone else.<sup>6</sup>

The *Orchos Tzadikim* teaches that "*ga'ava* leads to lust . . . which is the worst of all traits."<sup>7</sup> We will expand upon this later.

Rav Yisroel Salanter compares *chinuch* to a bird in hand. If you clasp your hands tightly you will crush it. If you open them too much, the bird will fly away.

Parents are the child's primary role model as well as his most powerful source of approval and stability. It follows that if a parent is too critical or rigid, the son/daughter will not perceive this as a miscalculation on the parent's part, but as his/her own true worth. Feeling crushed that he/she

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4. Research paper distributed by Dr. Sanford Landau, *ibid*.

5. *Sha'arei Avodas Elokim, Chelek Aleph*.

6. Dr. Avraham Twersky, "*I am I*," Sha'ar Press, 1993.

7. *Orchos Tzadikim, Sha'ar Haga'avah*, Orot Chaim Publications, 5755.

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is not meeting up to the expectations of their most eminent paradigms can result in serious repercussions.

Due to their own past traumas, parents may adopt the attitude that excessive permissiveness is an appropriate rearing method. Subsequently the son/daughter will perceive that anything that he/she does is acceptable, leading to a false sense of security and independence. They will lack boundaries and feel frustrated when things don't go their way. Defiance of authority, and unwillingness to compromise, are prone to occur.

Most critical to the issue at hand is that when such children are faced with challenges, they characteristically have an inability to cope, which potentially can lead to harsh emotional ramifications.

I have heard in the name of Rav Shimshon Rafael Hirsh that *chinuch* begins 20 years before the child is born—in the parent's own character.

*Shalom bayit* (domestic peace), emotional issues of one or both parents, broken homes, or single parent homes all contribute an enormous influence on the emotional and spiritual future of the child. If one of the parents has mental health issues, he should exhibit courage by seeking help, which might save his family.

A word about sibling rivalry: Jealousy and quarrelling between, and mocking by, siblings can inflict emotional scars that will not easily heal. Sometimes a child can be afflicted by these with an indelible emotional/mental disorder. The sibling insults him because of his own embarrassment which this disorder causes. Aside from possibly triggering severe psychological ramifications, it will increase the victim's risk of addiction.

Congruent with all the challenges that parents face, infinite reward awaits them for their *mesiras nefesh*, caring and role in the continuity of *Klal Yisroel*.

## Peers

**A** lack of social skills can develop unhealthy peer relationships. A child requires an accepting peer group, especially in the adolescent years. Undesirable companions may lead teenagers to friends who may introduce him to a “new world” of chemical and computer/internet dependence. Today, the pervasive influence of society has even penetrated the walls of our holy Yeshivos.

It has recently been brought to my attention regarding a *talmid* in a mainstream yeshiva, from a Torah-oriented family, whose classmate displayed an

image before him from the hi-tech device sitting in his palm. The *talmid* became addicted to viewing such images and until this day, to the best of my knowledge, is still a victim.

## School

**A**nother sociological factor that has immense spiritual and emotional influence on a child/teenager is school. “School,” in this sense means the whole gamut of religious educational institutions from pre-school to *kollel*, including of course, day schools, Bais Yakkov schools and seminaries.

Anyone involved in Torah education, from the highest to the lowest levels, is being challenged more than ever before to find ways with which to imbue love of Torah and belief in the tenets of faith in a manner which will pre-empt the fantasies of desire fulfillments filling young minds.

My Rosh HaYeshiva, HaRav Moshe Feinstein, in his *Darash Moshe*, asks “Why did Moshe Rabbeinu need to spend 40 days and 40 nights in Heaven before he received the Second *Luchos*? He had already learned the entire Torah and how to transmit it during the 40 days he spent in Heaven before receiving the First *Luchos*.

The answer is, says R. Moshe, that no one can compare the learning capacities and spiritual strength of the Jewish people before the sin of the *Eygel* to their state afterwards. It was no longer the same. New breaches had occurred in the meantime; it was now necessary to revitalize their will and to elevate their spiritual levels in a different manner. A different approach and a new methodology was now required to teach Torah to the Jewish people. (See also a similar idea in *Shem Mishmuel, Parashas Ki Sisa*).

We are indeed living in a new world. Recently, the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the first cellphone was held, an event that changed history. The first use of the cell-phone was accompanied by a portentous message. When it happened, a representative of Motorola, the company which developed the phone, called up his counterpart at Bell Laboratories to tell him: “We beat you!” This instrument has become today’s high-tech weapon for enhancing negative character traits in people, exemplified by the drive to beat our competition exhibited by that phone call, ever since.

The onset of the 21<sup>st</sup> century has ushered in different attitudes and mindsets that require new understandings and techniques. It is vital that we grasp the

severity and dangers that exist, in order to comprehend the course of action that is most effective in combating the problem.

In the battle against addiction, the “Moshe Rabbeinus” of today are the Chinuch establishment and the community leaders.

In my 28 years in Chinuch, I have been privileged to see or hear about many individuals who have done their utmost to fight this battle. Their dedication to teach Torah, to develop their students’ souls, to perform juggling acts between tolerance and assertiveness, to walk the tightrope between empathy and discipline—all these were all done with unconditional caring and without consideration of the time expenditure involved.

We can win the war against addiction by realizing the importance of innovation, personal attention, and investing unlimited efforts to learn new techniques with humility to change our perspectives for the urgent needs of the hour. Chinuch professionals carry the additional responsibility of being role models to the students as well as to the general society.

## Community

**T**o be successful against the harmful onslaughts of addiction requires the combined efforts of entire community. There must be an interaction between *Rabbanim*, Educators, community workers, lay leaders, and mental health professionals who must work as a unit against the dangerous influences and ramifications of the hi-tech world, in order to effectuate change.

Community leaders are becoming increasingly cognizant of the need to educate parents and students regarding the perils of addiction, to present the facts in appropriate forums (such as this), to organize community meetings, to bring the issues to the forefront and encourage safeguards. Today it is more vital than ever for community activists to initiate bonds with competent Orthodox addiction professionals. There are many caring organizations and foundations who can provide resources to subsidize mental health and rehabilitation costs.

A good example of the importance of community unity and participation is the Flatbush Jewish Community Coalition (FJCC). This is a coalition which promotes advocacy and deals with constructive improvement in the large Orthodox Flatbush community. It is my hope that other communities will do the same. These communities should also champion recovery efforts for addicts.

## **Psychological Factors**

**L**earning disabilities and individuals with ADD or ADHD are high risk candidates to addiction. Anxiety disorders such as Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD) have been also been shown to be present in conjunction with addictions. Indeed, OCD is considered within the addiction family. Treatment for pre-existing emotional and psychological conditions should be included in any treatment plan for the addict.

Psychiatric illnesses, autism and abuse increase the potential of the onset of addiction.

## **Types of Computer Addictions**

**T**he main categories of addiction are substance abuse, chemical abuse (alcoholism, etc.) food disorders, gambling, and computer/internet addiction.

Computer addictions encompass many areas. One of them is the well-known social networking, but included in this are also missionary propaganda, slander, impugning the honor of Gedolim and Rabbonim, and the unregulated exchange of images. Chatrooms compromise the lives of most male/female teenagers and have been responsible for severe breaches in married life.

Bais Yaakov students have run away from their homes to join “cyber friends.” A formerly Orthodox Jew left his wife and family in ruins for a gentile companion acquired via chat room exchanges, These are far from isolated incidents.

Texting addiction is particularly dangerous since parents who are wary of permitting their children internet connections are more inclined to permit texting on computers and cell phones. Texting has become the norm of basic teen-age communication.

Initial forms of addiction are prompted by a sense of disengagement—the opportunity to “loosen up” or “chill out” which causes abusers to feel “liberated.”

As addiction sets in, people begin to text while crossing streets, driving, and even during davening. According to a study presented at the annual Pediatric Academic Society’s meeting, nearly 43% of driving high school students, surveyed in 2011, admitted texting while behind the wheel. This will explain

why the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has said, “Motor vehicle accidents are the leading cause of death amongst teenagers.”

Without the inhibitory effect of a face to face conversation, texting encourages the evils of various forms of slander, namely, *lashon horah*, *motzi shem ra*, and *rechilus*.<sup>8</sup>

Marriage is not a magic formula for achieving sobriety from an addiction. Even after marriage, people are seen texting while wheeling carriages, and while shirking other responsibilities—which puts them in emotional, physical and marital danger.

## Internet/ Lust Addiction

**I**AD/LA is a compulsive-impulsive disorder that should be considered a psychological ill. It is estimated that nine million people in America can be labeled “pathological computer users.” The addict becomes entrenched in unhealthy behavior to the point of social isolation, disrupting his academic and job performance, and/or causing a spouse to seek counseling for relationship issues.<sup>9</sup>

Dr. Stephen Friedman, Orthodox addiction therapist, has said that when one is “bombarded” by the sensual stimuli viewed on internet, his pleasure pathways in the brain are overloaded. No neutralizing response is possible. This resembles a victim experiencing a cocaine binge; colloquially, it “blows his mind.”<sup>10</sup>

Similarly, Dr. Dovid Goldwasser, an addiction psychologist, states that “clinicians and researchers who testified before the Senate’s Commerce Subcommittee of Technology and space in Nov. 2004 described the immorality on the internet as the “new crack cocaine with similar destructive results.”

It follows that internet addiction poses a real danger to a Jew’s soul for it seriously thwarts any spiritual growth. Studies indicate that the use of internet is as significant factor in nearly 50% of familial and/or marital relationship problems. In the past children and adults would spend evenings and free time

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8. *The Addicted Soul*, Rabbi Dovid Goldwasser.

9. *Ibid.*, Page 28.

10. Dr. Stephen Friedman, Nefesh Workshop, Neve Yerushalayim, 2012.

together conversing and/or playing games. Internet addiction has changed that dynamic.<sup>11</sup>

Dr. Friedman opines that the SA is particularly difficult to control because of the triple A's: Anonymity, Accessibility, and Affordability.<sup>12</sup> Anonymity—one can view the most spiritually depraved material in one's private chambers. Accessibility—a press of a button is all that is required. Affordability—low prices are ubiquitous—especially on-line.”

One hundred thousand websites offer obscene material. One in seven youths is reported being solicited by pornographic sites while browsing the “web.”<sup>13</sup>

Many gentile mental health professionals view internet addictions as a disorder as well.

The Center for Internet Addictions Recovery has been devoted to helping those who suffer from IAD since 1995. Dr. Kimberly Young presented a research paper in 1996 entitled “Internet Addiction—The Emergence of a New Disorder” at the American Psychological Association's annual conference in Toronto.

Internet addiction is now considered a disorder considered for inclusion in the upcoming revision of Diagnostic and Statistical manual of Mental Disorders (DSM).<sup>14</sup>

Internet addiction also has physical ramifications. A study of college students classified as computer addicts, entitled “Does Addictive Internet Use Restructure the Brain,” found reduction in the dorso-lateral prefrontal cortex and other pleasure centers of the brain. Physical changes include weight gain or loss, backaches, headaches and carpal tunnel syndrome.<sup>15</sup>

Indeed, even if the LA is not pathological, one who is pre-occupied with what one watches, is rarely at peace at other times, for his mind continually evokes images of what he has viewed, and he has a continual craving to return to his viewing. Usually, the addict wakes up each morning with the sole thought on his mind, “How can I satiate my lust today.”

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11. *Ibid.*, *The Addicted Soul*.

12. *Ibid.*, Dr. Stephen Friedman.

13. *Ibid.*

14. Center for Online Addiction, 2000.

15. Study, University of Southern California, 2011.

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Many LA feel profound guilt and anguish. Some are pulled in because of events beyond their control, as mentioned previously. They deserve our feelings of empathy and, especially, our prayers.

Very often the nature of this addiction is such that a person will remain entrapped in his lust attachment until he is jolted out of his complacency by a trauma which causes him to seek help.

### **Treatment**

**T**reatment usually occurs in two sequences: 1) early intervention; 2) therapy. Early intervention, in this case, means employing safeguards to prevent the onslaught of this addiction. Therapy offers options towards recovery by an addiction specialist and/or participation in a self-help group.

This is true of any compulsive pull. It is essential to immediately see a competent Rav or mental health professional to save enormous potential harm and anguish.

### **Early Intervention Safeguards**

**T**o establish accountability, filtering software programs can be installed that reduce web-browsing or deny access to inappropriate sites and images to keep the habit from becoming compulsive or addictive. Some filters offer closed system options which lock one out of the internet allowing one's access only to pre-selected sites. Sometimes the potential abuser (i.e. anyone) allows another party (parent or wife) to possess the password to "online" who will supervise him.

Much information has already been conveyed above about the importance of childrearing, education, peer associations, and community participation. However, pre-emption is the optimal weapon against addiction.

## **Therapy**

**T**he addiction therapist can make an evaluation, and design a treatment program based on individual needs. Lust dependence is complex and there is no one size that fits all formula.

The professional must conduct himself with empathy and understanding. In general, he endeavors to change distorted perceptions, teaches compensation techniques for dispositional factors, imparts social and coping skills, and provides a healthy spiritual framework.

When rapport is established, the therapist works to break denial patterns, deals with root issues, builds self-esteem and designs a treatment plan to which the client will commit. One of the important skills of a professional is to use wisdom and common sense to determine when to be tolerant and when to “put down the law.”

Since LA involves fantasizing, the counselor uses techniques to get the victim to focus on the here and now. Effective treatment must involve cunning ways to avoid triggers to compulsive behaviors.

Another group of people often require treatment. In their zeal to help, the parent, spouse, etc. can fall into a major pitfall. That pitfall is called Co-Dependency. This a sickness when the loved one thinks that he/she can control the addiction, taking responsibility for the addict, neglecting his/her own needs, suppressing emotions and acting as a martyr.

A certain unfortunate woman suffering from co-dependency because of her husband's addiction to illicit relationships, shared her feelings with her Rav who had not advised her properly. “The slogan for Co-Addicts (Co-Dependents),” she said, “is keeping the 3-C's. You didn't **C**ause it, You don't **C**ontrol it, and You can't **C**ure it.

She went on to explain: “This [the 3-C's and group facilitation] has helped me understand why the Rav's guidance didn't help the addiction. For example, I was advised to be available to my husband, and even initiate the relationship. But most of the addiction specialists hold the opposite. An addict has to be dealt with a tough way and suffer consequences. Most of the time, an addict needs to be threatened in order to put his life together.”

The specialist told the woman that “if I accept my husband unconditionally, he will not feel the need to get his life together.” The woman continued to explain that giving her husband unconditional support, and attending to his

every need showed tacit acceptance of his behavior, which means he will never change.

This woman suffered severe emotional trauma as a result of her husband's addiction and required treatment and involvement in a self-help group. Her children also required professional intervention.<sup>16</sup>

The word “cure” is not relevant to addictions, because relapse will usually occur. Therefore the addiction counselor needs to remain in contact to maintain sobriety. A competent counselor must continually remain a confidante, deterrent, and support system for his client.

Frequently, the addictions specialist recommends the client to a twelve-step therapy or a self-help group. The difference between the two is that the former is moderated by a therapist, and the latter is led by a “clean” addict or group member.

## Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)

**F**or many years CBT has shown to be an effective approach for anxiety disorders such as OCD, phobias, and depression. It is becoming increasingly utilized with many other mental health issues and disorders such as addictions.

CBT operates on the premise that cognitions, i.e., thoughts, are the root of behavior patterns. This concurs with the statement of the *Orchos Tzaddikim* many centuries ago, that one “learns [traits] to which he grows inclined because of some thought that has arisen in his heart.”<sup>17</sup> These cognitions are reflective of core beliefs. If one's core beliefs are irrational his resultant thoughts will effect corresponding emotions and behavior. The behavior will often be maladaptive.

Just as habits can be learned they can be unlearned by challenging underlying cognitions and attitudes.

The CBT therapist uses techniques to transform irrational cognitions and core beliefs to abort compulsive behavior and promote recovery. Change through therapy must not be attempted hastily, but at intervals.

It must be emphasized that no specific therapeutic approach is etched in stone. Therefore a competent Orthodox addiction specialist usually chooses to

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16. *Yishmira Daas, Chelek Bais*, Rabbi Pinchas Yehoshua Kaganoff, 2012.

17. *Orchos Tzaddikim*, Introduction, Feldheim, 1996.

be eclectic. He examines his approaches to make sure that they do not contradict Torah values.

## **Conclusion**

**T**oday there are a number of competent Orthodox addiction professionals available with outstretched hands. Self-help and therapy groups for males exist in the U.S.A. and Israel. A Torah oriented website called Guard Your Eyes.com provides extensive programs, resource materials, and referral services that can be very helpful in battling lust cravings and addictions. A dynamic group of addiction specialists in Israel is in the process of being formed to provide essential information and provide recovery services. But perhaps the most important step is that the craver and *LA wants* to seek help.

May we be ever sensitive to the suffering of the lust addict and simultaneously be proactive, each in his own way and as a community, in bringing him to full freedom.

We raise our voices to our Merciful Father to eradicate this epidemic from our brothers, the Jewish people.<sup>18</sup>

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18. For comments and questions the author may be reached at [caring.spanglet@gmail.com](mailto:caring.spanglet@gmail.com).