

## **AM I ADDICTED?**

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Clients sometimes ask me this question, as we're discussing their drinking habits or drug use. Or they'll answer it themselves, saying something like "Yeah, I've got a problem, but I don't think I'm addicted to it," as if that's an important distinction. "You're asking the wrong question," I'll respond. The important question is, "Has your drinking (or drug use) caused any problems in your life?"

For example, have your friends or family members complained about it? Has it led to misunderstandings or conflicts in your relationships? Have you done or said things while under the influence that you've seriously regretted later? Has your use led to financial, legal or health problems? Have you broken promises, to yourself or others, due to your use? If you can answer "yes" to even one of these questions, then it's a problem.

Two things seem to interfere with most people being able to recognize if they are addicted to a substance: 1) lack of knowledge about what addiction is, and 2) an understandable reluctance to admit that they may not be in control of their life. No one wants to admit that they can't always control their behavior, let alone consider that they might be an alcoholic or an addict.

So I tell clients it's not necessary to answer the question: if you know you drink too much, either sometimes or all the time, you don't need to decide whether or not you're an alcoholic – you just need to accept that drinking has become a problem for you, and be willing to do something about it. The same goes for a problem with drugs, whether illegal or prescription – or cigarettes, caffeine, sugar, gambling, work, sex or anger (all things that people can get addicted to).

By the way, the official diagnostic criteria for addiction are: 1) tolerance, that is, you need to consume increasingly more of the substance to achieve the desired effect; 2) withdrawal symptoms (physical and/or psychological) when you stop using; and 3) a pattern of compulsive behavior involving the substance. Because signs of tolerance and withdrawal aren't always present, or obvious, it's best to focus on the behavior.

Such behaviors might include consuming more than you intended to, sneaking or lying about your use, planning your day around when you get to use, and giving up activities or friendships that interfere with using. Making lots of rules for yourself about when and where you can use, or repeated but unsuccessful efforts to cut down or stop using, are also behaviors that point to a probable addiction.

If your honest answer is "yes, it's causing problems in my life", then my advice is to do something, now. You can try to cut down on your own, or try substituting a healthier habit, like exercise. If that works, great! If it doesn't, then it's time to seek help. Ask your doctor for a referral, call your EAP, or go to a "12-Step" meeting, like AA. Call the Substance Abuse Treatment Hotline at (800) 662-HELP, or find out what programs are in your area through <http://findtreatment.samhsa.gov>. Or feel free to contact me for an evaluation or referrals.