

positive addiction¹

William Glasser

One of the problems I've tried to solve as a psychiatrist has been how to teach people to help themselves grow strong. The stronger we are the better able we are to handle the stresses in our lives and the happier we'll be. People do badly because they're not strong enough to get what they want from life and, lacking strength, settle for a series of painful compromises that are loosely, but inaccurately, labeled mental illness. To counteract this, the task of any therapist isn't only to help his/her clients grow stronger, but also to teach them ways in which they can do so on their own.

What Is Positive Addiction?

I believe that most people can use positive addiction to help themselves grow stronger. In fact, as I'll explain shortly, positive addiction doesn't require anyone else; it doesn't even exist in the active presence of others. In short, it's the only truly self-help practice I know.

Schuba Interview

The idea of positive addiction came to me while I was reading Roger Kahn's *The Boys of Summer*,² a book about baseball players. It describes them in their heyday, and what happens to them after they quit playing. The particular team described is the 1953 championship Brooklyn Dodgers.

One of the players Kahn interviewed about 1970, long after he'd finished playing, was George Schuba. Kahn said "George, what I have always liked about you was your great natural swing." Schuba explained that when he was 16 years old, he wanted more than anything to become a major league ballplayer. He knew he could field, but he had to learn to hit. He noticed that good hitters had great swings. So, he decided to take a weighted bat to the basement of his house and swing the bat at a piece of string for a target marked with knots in the strike zone. He did this every day for the next 21 years, 600 times a day!

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*Discipline or
Addiction?*

When I read this, something snapped inside of me. I couldn't explain how anyone could show this much discipline for so long. Finally, I arrived at what seemed at first to be a wild explanation—he became addicted to swinging a bat. If he tried to give it up, he'd suffer so much withdrawal he'd have to continue. Schuba doesn't like the idea of addiction, but he agrees 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 down to the basement, and swung it the remaining 200 or 300 times to complete the 600.

If Schuba was addicted, then certainly the whole concept of addiction as a negative process would have to be reexamined because there's nothing about swinging a bat that could be negative. If this addiction helped him to the major leagues, it would have to be a positive one.

*Qualities of
Positive Addiction*

I began to outline in my head some of the requisites for a positive addiction. It seemed that a positive addiction was something a person chose to do, did by himself/herself, took some discipline to do it, believed in what he/she did, and did it on a regular basis. Then sometime later, the person became so hooked into doing it that if he/she tried to stop it, he/she suffered withdrawal symptoms. On the other hand, unlike common addictions, which I now call negative, weakening addictions like alcohol and other drugs, gambling, and over-eating, this was a positive addiction in that it undoubtedly made the person stronger.

While I was reviewing this concept in my mind, I thought of an experience I'd had several years before with some sons of a friend of mine. The sons were doing badly in college and then suddenly my friend said they began to do better. When I asked why, he said they'd started meditating, having learned Transcendental Meditation from the Maharishi. He said they spent 15 or 20 minutes twice a day in meditation. From this, their lives seemed to quickly change for the better.

When I talked to his sons about meditation, they took me to hear the Maharishi at UCLA. My initial reaction was that meditation was an incredibly boring practice. They insisted it wasn't and much later, while thinking about Schuba, I realized that they too had become addicted to a daily mental discipline that was in a sense similar to the physical discipline of swinging a bat. I inferred that a positive addiction could be mental or physical, as long as it was regular, helpful, you believed in it, it was done alone, and you felt you were improving in whatever process you chose to do. Eventually,

somehow or another, if you did it for some time, you became addicted to it.

Positive Addiction Activities Vary

As I talked to more and more people about positive addiction, I found that many people 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 when a young monk about 30 years old told me he was addicted to chanting. Each day for an hour he chanted the psalms. He'd been alcoholic at age 18 and drunk heavily for the next 6 or 7 years. Then at age 25, he reevaluated his life. He concluded he was going to kill himself with drink, and desperately decided to chant in some effort to help himself.

He couldn't explain how he'd chosen chanting, but he reported that gradually he lost all desire to drink. Within six months, he believed he was as firmly hooked on chanting as he had been on drinking, but now his whole life was changed. He had always wanted to be a monk and began to study to be one. He is now the chief monk of a small monastery in southern California.

Obviously, positive addiction has done a great deal for him, even to the point of quenching a negative addiction. He confirmed he was addicted by explaining that if he didn't chant, he suffered the same tortures, both physical and mental, that he'd previously suffered when he'd unsuccessfully tried to stop drinking.

I was now convinced that positive addiction is a valid idea, that it is open to anyone who has the discipline, to try it, that somehow or other it can help people to become a great deal stronger, and this strength can be used in any facet of their lives. People told me that they were positively addicted to a variety of activities including 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 don't think were.

As I gathered data, I established the criteria for a positive addiction. It had to be something that definitely benefited you, that you did at least a half hour to an hour a day regularly that you became good at, that you believed in, and that you suffered withdrawal pain from if you tried to quit it.

Two Questions

Why Addicting?

I wanted to answer two more questions about positive addiction: (1) what made an activity addicting and (2) what was there about a positive addiction that strengthened one mentally.

While I was talking in Toronto later that year, a man stood up and said he was addicted to running. I hadn't heard running previously described as a positive addiction, although at this time it's the most addicting of all the positive addictions. The man ran an hour every day. He said he suffered tremendous pain (physical and mental) if he didn't run. He explained how he'd lost 55 pounds, given up smoking, and had been getting along better with everyone, since he'd begun running.

Then, he volunteered that there was only one problem with running—it was dangerous. He said something happens when you run, you go into a kind of transcendental state of mind where you don't pay attention to things around you. In this state, you tend to cross streets against the light and run into traffic. I was immediately intrigued by this state of mind and the word he used to describe it . . . transcendental, as if the mind had "spun out."

After interviewing and studying many positive addicts, most of whom were runners or meditators, I've discovered that this state of mind is necessary for an activity to become positively addicting. Unless you get into this spun out, somewhat detached, state of consciousness, the activity isn't addicting. This state of mind is described as very pleasurable. One runner said it's "as if my mind leaves my head and floats along beside my body having an extremely wonderful time doing anything it wants, and occasionally looking down at my poor body and observing 'the poor soul is running his guts out while I am having such a good time.' "

It's this duality, this separation, this leaving one's mind alone to do its own thing that seems to be necessary for positive addiction. Like negative addiction, this positive addiction feels extremely good. However, negative addiction produces a good feeling but no strength, whereas positive addiction produces both the feeling and the strength. After much study and questioning many positive addicts, I've concluded that to get into this state of mind, you have to accept yourself completely as you engage in the positively addicting activity. It's this complete acceptance of this routine, usually rhythmic, activity that somehow allows the mind to spin out and enter, naturally, an altered state of consciousness. I also believe that when this altered state of consciousness occurs frequently enough, the person becomes addicted to the activity.

Strengthen How?

Because I believe this state of consciousness causes the brain to strengthen itself, my second question is how does it

do this? I believe that something electrically or biochemically causes the brain to rejuvenate or tune itself into a state of confident readiness, a powerful state of mind in which it can successfully attack the problems of life as they come along.

The recent work of E. Roy John on brain functioning, published in the May, 1976, issue of *Psychology Today*, indicates that the brain, under certain circumstances, can actually grow stronger directly. I believe that this positive addiction state of mind may be one of these circumstances. No doubt those positive addicts who experience this state of mind grow stronger. Some grow strong enough, as the mor did, to overcome a strong negative addiction like alcoholism.

Wide Implications

The implications of positive addiction are wide. You can try to get involved in an activity that you believe in. If you get involved in it on a regular basis, are non-self-critical in the process, and your mind begins to spin out or transcend, you'll eventually become addicted to the activity. Once addicted, you'll grow stronger, and this strength will be available to be used in any way you wish to make your life better.

I'm sure many people reading this article will understand what I'm talking about, especially those who are engaged in a regular activity and who have suffered withdrawal when they tried to quit it. They're addicts, they haven't talked much about it because they haven't understood what they're into. I hope this discussion of positive addiction will help them do better what they're doing, and I hope it will interest others to start.

Footnotes

1. This article is based on William Glasser's book *Positive Addiction* published by Harper & Row, New York, 1976, 159 pages.
2. Roger Kahn, *The Boys of Summer* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971).