

THE MASTER Series

# REFRAMING HOW WE THINK ABOUT ADDICTION

Johann Hari



*Johann Eduard Hari is a British-Swiss writer and journalist. He has written for publications including The Independent and The Huffington Post, and has written books on the topics of depression, the war on drugs, and the British monarchy.*

*Hari graduated from King's College, Cambridge in 2001 with a double first in social and political sciences. In January 2015, Hari published Chasing the Scream: The First and Last Days of the War on Drugs. He proposes the idea that most addictions are functional responses to experiences and a lack of healthy supportive relationships, rather than a simple biological need for a particular substance.*

*In January 2018, Hari's book Lost Connections, which deals with depression and anxiety, was published, with Hari citing his childhood issues, career crisis, and experiences with antidepressants and psychotherapy as fuelling his curiosity in the subject.*



## SEARCHING FOR ANSWERS

I was a child when I first encountered drug addiction, being unable to wake a relative and at the time not fully understanding why. As time passed it became clear that drug addiction was in my family. Through trying to support and help loved ones struggling with addiction, I realized there were really significant questions that I didn't know the answers to. What actually causes addiction? What are the different approaches to treatment? Why are these effective? After finding no clear answers to these questions, I went on a journey to explore addiction across the world.

I strived to learn from people who had lived and studied addiction themselves, sometimes traveling 30,000 miles just to hear a story. What I realized from this journey and all of those that I met along the way, is that almost everything we think to be true about addiction is wrong. To truly make a difference, we are going to need to a lot more than just change our drug policies. We're going to need to change our core beliefs around addiction.



## WHAT WE THINK WE KNOW ABOUT ADDICTION

It has been over one hundred years since drugs were first banned in the United States and Great Britain, a move that quickly spread across the rest of the world. Our general understanding of addiction in the 21st century seems to be that because of the chemical hooks in drugs like heroin, the body soon becomes dependent..

However, this commonly shared vision of addiction fails to consider the way that doctors prescribe drugs such as diamorphine, also called heroin. Diamorphine is an incredibly popular painkiller, taken by cancer patients and post-surgery inpatients. If what we currently think about addiction is correct, patients taking diamorphine would become dependent on those chemical hooks and become addicts. Detailed research has been done, and this just doesn't happen. So why do we still hold the same beliefs about addiction?



The search for an answer to this question led me to Bruce Alexander, a professor of psychology in Vancouver. Professor Alexander explained that most of the beliefs that we have about addiction come from a series of experiments done on rats earlier in the 20th century. The experiments studied rats put in cages with two water bottles, one with just water and the other laced with heroin or cocaine. The results were pretty clear; the rats almost always preferred to drink the water laced with drugs and, as a result, overdosed and died. Apply these results to our collective understanding of addiction in humans and you reach the conclusion that drug consumption will almost always result in addiction. In the 1970's Professor Alexander looked critically at this experiment, highlighting that the rats are put in an empty cage with nothing to do except take the drug laced water. In response, he decided to adapt the experiment and re-evaluate. Professor Alexander created something called

Rat Park inside a cage. This was a highly stimulating environment with a lot of cheese, things to play with like balls and tunnels, and importantly other rats to socialize and mate with. He added the two water bottles to the cage, one with water and the other laced with drugs. Interestingly, the rats in Rat Park almost never drank the drug-laced water. None of them drank it compulsively and not a single rat overdosed.

Comparing the results of the two experiments, almost 100% of rats overdosed when isolated in the cage, and 0% overdosed in Rat Park, living social and connected lives in a stimulating environment. When we try to relate these findings to human behavior, it would be easy to dismiss the results as being specific to rats, creatures quite different to us. However, parallel to these experiments on rats in the 70s, similar experiments were done on humans.

## A CHANGE IN FOCUS

During the Vietnam war, 20% of US troops were taking heroin, leading to serious concerns about what might happen when the war ended. There were worries that when the troops came home, there would be an addiction crisis with hundreds-of-thousands of heroin addicts on the streets. Given our understanding of addiction at the time, this seemed like a well-founded fear.

However, The Archives of General Psychiatry did an incredibly detailed study on what happened to those who were using heroin as they left Vietnam

and arrived home. Contrary to expectation, these soldiers did not go into withdrawal or go to rehab. Ninety five percent of them just stopped taking heroin. Based on what we think we understand about the chemical hooks in drugs like heroin, this result is surely impossible.

This led Professor Alexander, and other academics to re-evaluate what we think we know about addiction. Leading to the consideration that addiction might not be all about chemical hooks, but in fact determined much more heavily by our environment. He posed the question; What if addiction is an adaptation to one's environment?



## ADDICTION OR BONDING

Parallel to Professor Alexander's research and theorisations, Dutch professor Peter Cohen suggested that we should discard the word addiction and replace it with bonding. He based this on the idea that human beings have a natural and innate need to bond. Put simply, when we are happy and healthy we will bond and connect with each other.

However, if for some reason you're unable to do that, whether it's because you've experienced trauma, are isolated or beaten down by life, you will bond with something that will give you a certain sense of relief. This could take the shape of gambling, pornography, cocaine, cannabis, or a myriad of other things, but the end-result is still the same - you will bond and connect with something because it is part of human nature.



## HOW WE TREAT ADDICTED PEOPLE

The way that so many countries treat substance users actually perpetuates the cycle of addiction. Users are criminalized and isolated from society. They're punished, shamed, and pushed to the curb.

People are also given criminal records, further putting barriers between them reconnecting with others in society. Dr. Gabor Maté put it best: If you wanted to design a system that would make addiction worse, you wouldn't - it's already in place in most countries.

Fortunately, there is a system taking root that strives to do things a little differently. In the year 2000, Portugal had one of the worst drug problems in Europe. One percent of people in Portugal were addicted to heroin. This number would increase every year and yet, they still persisted with the same model. People were punished, stigmatized and shamed. Every year, the problem just gets worse.



Eventually, the Prime Minister and the Leader of The Opposition in Portugal agreed to set up a panel of scientists and doctors to find alternative long-term solutions to this problem. The proposal that was presented to the government was to decriminalize all drugs, and crucially, to divert all money that had previously been spent on cutting substance users off towards programs that reconnected them with society.

A huge program of job creation for people with substance dependencies was created, with micro-loans for people to set up small businesses. Recognising the humanity in people and that they often had jobs, skills, and passions before their struggles with addiction became a key part of the scheme.



The program aimed to support people in getting jobs that were of interest to them and that genuinely excited them. The fundamental goal was to make sure that every person in Portugal had something to live for. Something to inspire them and get them out of bed in the morning. When I went to Portugal, it was fascinating to hear what people said. Many described rediscovering purpose, bonds, and relationships after the scheme was introduced.

Over 20 years has passed since this experiment of decriminalization, and research shows that injected drug use is down in Portugal by 50%, according to the British Journal of Criminology. In my view, this holds testament to the fact that we need to change our way of thinking about addiction. We need to review the current system in Britain and the USA, developing a program that's less about punishment and stigmatization, and more about acceptance and support.

## INDIVIDUAL RECOVERY WITH SOCIAL RECOVERY

In the words of Professor Bruce Alexander, when talking about addiction we regularly discuss individual recovery. This is important, but we also need to talk about social recovery. For too many people in modern society, their life looks a lot like the isolated cage in the rat experiments, and a lot less like bustling Rat Park.

My personal reasons for embarking on these years of research was to better support the people that I love who are addicted. Being candid, I admit that it is not easy to love someone in addiction. The way that we are encouraged by mainstream media to support people with substance dependency is to present them with an ultimatum. Wherein they are given the choice to 'get clean' or face

being completely cut off and isolated. The more I understand about addiction and the different approaches to supporting addicted people, I begin to see why that approach doesn't work.

Reflecting on this, I decided to change my approach. What I try to do, which I admit is incredibly difficult to do consistently, is to deepen the connection with the addicted people in my life. I try to say 'I love you,' whether they're using or not, and make it clear that I'll always be there for them no matter what state they're in. I can't pretend that this is easy, but it would be easier if we create a culture that makes people feel loved and not alone from the start. "We love you" has to be the core message at every level of how we respond to addicted people socially, politically and individually. The opposite of addiction is not sobriety. The opposite of addiction is connection.



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