

Addictive Thinking

What is addictive thinking?

“I am absolutely powerless to control my use, maybe.” This is just one example of the addictive thinking, or “stinking thinking,” that can cause you to relapse. Addictive thinking involves a combination of negative attitudes, distorted thinking, and an intense resistance to change. While you were using drugs and/or alcohol, you probably invented all sorts of ways to deny and justify using while trying to avoid negative consequences. These same denying and justifying thoughts can threaten your recovery unless you are prepared to recognize them and replace them with the early recovery lessons you learned from the Twelve Steps: you are powerless against addiction, addiction is a disease that requires a spiritual solution, and you don’t have all the answers.

What are some examples of addictive thinking?

“I can have just one drink and then I’ll stop” is a good example of thinking that, on the surface, may sound quite logical. Additional consideration, however, immediately shows the idea to be completely illogical, given your past history of having “just one.” Telling yourself that you’ll turn over all your resentments except your anger at a particular person is a good example of stinking thinking. “All” means all; it doesn’t mean excluding a person or thing.

After a brief return to use, you might tell yourself that you understand where you got off track. You’ll do it differently next time. You won’t get caught in the same trap. You will find a way to control your drinking. This thinking undermines the lesson you learned in Step One: you are powerless over your addiction.

Other examples of stinking thinking can be found in thoughts such as “People who hang around AA and NA are losers who can’t find friends anywhere else” or “I’m sick of everyone trying to run my life.” When you defy, scoff, belittle, make excuses, or say things to keep people off your back, you are demonstrating a negative attitude. You are showing the world a kind of false pride, or grandiosity, that will only hurt your recovery in the end.

What are the consequences of addictive thinking?

Grandiosity is a natural outgrowth of stinking thinking. You find yourself thinking that the rules don't apply to you.

You might think that the Twelve Steps are for others who aren't quite as smart as you are. The truth is that it doesn't matter how smart you are. People functioning at the highest intellectual levels are just as vulnerable to addictive thinking as anyone else. You may have justified your use by telling yourself that you're not as bad off as others. Or you may have told yourself that others need to work hard at each Step, but you only need to do enough to get by.

Another consequence of addictive thinking is perfectionism. You set expectations for yourself that you can't possibly reach and then beat yourself up when you fail. Perfectionism is a form of grandiosity. The addictive thinking goes something like this: "I will do it perfectly because I can, because I really am the exception, and because my intelligence and insight are unique."

Addictive thinking leads to rigid thinking. You tend to view things in extremes—either black or white. Such thinking causes you to jump on a solution impulsively, leading you to conclusions and solutions that are probably incorrect, inappropriate, or just not helpful. In fact, you might be dead wrong, but distorted thinking will help you hide that reality from yourself.

Eventually your addictive thinking doesn't make sense even to you. At this point, you stop caring that your thoughts and resulting behaviors are illogical and inappropriate to the situations at hand. You fall back on your substance-using rituals to find comfort. Deep inside you really don't want to find solutions because chaotic emotions, relationships, and events in your life feed the "reason" for your continued substance use disorder. The thinking at this point is "If others had it this bad, they'd use or drink too. I deserve some relief from this mess that life has handed to me."

How can you avoid or overcome addictive thinking?

To avoid the return of addictive thinking, you must be diligent. Remember that the Big Book calls alcohol and other drugs "cunning, baffling, and powerful." This means that you must work at honesty every minute of every hour of every day. What triggers your addictive thinking? Make a list of the people, places, and situations that may usher in the old distorted thoughts. If being with others who drink or use will lead you to "just one" thinking, you can avoid those people

and situations. If you can't avoid them, have a plan to honor your recovery goals, such as taking a clean and sober friend along. Limit the time and plan on doing something immediately afterward that you especially enjoy. The possibilities for the old thinking to return are endless, but so are the potential solutions.

To overcome addictive thinking, you must clear away distorted thoughts by rooting out lies, denial, rationalization, and minimization. You have to dig deep to find and let go of character defects like grandiosity and perfectionism. Intense isolation and loneliness are an inevitable result of addictive thinking. You become alienated from yourself and others in all areas of your life. You need to re-establish your connections, first with yourself and then with others.

The first step to overcoming addictive thinking is to become honest with yourself.

Not an easy task, as you know, but that's exactly what the Twelve Steps will help you accomplish. With time and your best effort in working each of the Steps, you come to know yourself. In the very first Step, you are asked to accept the idea that your life has become unmanageable—your first venture into self-knowledge. Each Step takes you to another level of knowing and accepting yourself. As you develop a healthy relationship with yourself, you prepare yourself to do the same with others. These relationships are the connective tissue that forms your ongoing recovery reality check and support system.

What are the attitudes that will harm your recovery?

In addition to grandiosity, perfectionism, and rigid thinking, blame, shame, control, pessimism, hopelessness, and isolation will interfere with your recovery. Such attitudes involve a kind of negativity that drains your energy, pushes others away, and leaves you without external reality checks. You are left to your own thinking, which, when not examined either by yourself or others who know you, will allow distortions. Distorted thinking leads to a distorted idea of events and distorted solutions. Incorrect thinking paves the way for incorrect conclusions: "Just one won't hurt," "I can stop," "No one will know," "It's really not that bad."

Certain attitudes are a red flag for relapse. Watch for signs of self-pity, impatience, blame, rationalization, resentment, anger, and pessimism. Ask for help if you become overly sensitive to what others say and do, or if you suddenly find yourself full of righteous anger, or if you are laboring under thoughts of "Who

cares?” or “None of this matters anyway.” These are the attitudes that lead to a return of addictive thinking, which can lead to relapse.

What are the attitudes that will help your recovery?

An attitude of trust in yourself, other people, and your Higher Power is needed to maintain your healthy recovery. To accept your powerlessness and unmanageability in Step One requires you to abandon your old reality. Although it sounds easy, giving up addictive thinking is hard. Even if it’s “stinking thinking,” it’s old, familiar, and therefore comfortable ground. When you let go of all the defenses and insane thoughts that held your reality together, what’s left? Cultivate an attitude of trust so you can be open and remain open to the perceptions and knowledge of others.

A spiritual openness is another attitude that will aid your recovery. Addiction occurs in a vacuum, when you used chemicals to fill an empty space. That space is a spiritual void that, if filled with addiction, will leave no room—or need—to satisfy your craving for meaning in your life.

Awareness of the moment will help you absorb what is real. Being present in the moment replaces any need to weave a fictional story that only you believe about your life. Work at telling the truth. When difficult feelings arise, take time to understand them. For example, if a vague sense of uneasiness turns out to be shame or guilt, what is causing the feeling? What truths can you tell yourself or another that will dispel the sense that what you’ve done or who you are is somehow deficient?

And finally, humility is an attitude that will allow you to question, listen, learn, admit, assert, and clarify—whatever is needed to humbly admit wrongs and ask for help in letting go.

What is perfectionism?

Perfectionism is the inability to make or allow mistakes. Perfectionism is a form of addictive thinking that leads to a negative cycle. You feel bad or inadequate about past mistakes, compensate by setting goals too high, make a mistake, and then feel inadequate once again. It’s a no-win situation and a setup to fail in sobriety. Yet recovering people tend to do this over and over. Perfectionism is another face of insane, or addictive, thinking.

Perfectionism brings much anxiety and stress to your recovery. The tension of trying to be perfect can permeate every act and thought every day. Do you really believe you can attain the goals you set for yourself? Why is it that you feel you must be perfect? Why should others be? What you expect of yourself is almost always transferred to everyone around you. When you feel tension in your day, ask yourself, “What will happen if it’s not done perfectly? Can I do it another way? If I make a mistake, is the consequence serious or minor? Does it really matter that much?”

The Twelve Steps are important in combating perfectionism. Working the Steps helps you cultivate an attitude of humility, which undermines perfectionism. Humble people don’t believe they are perfect. They accept that they can’t control everything and don’t know everything—and they rejoice in that knowledge. A huge weight will slip off your shoulders when you sincerely accept that a power or powers outside of yourself can help. Remember, the Big Book tells you that it’s progress, not perfection, that you seek.