Process Addictions
The New Gateway to Chemical Addiction?

W. Bryce Hagedorn, PhD, LMHC, NCC, MAC

“Process” Addiction?
What is that?

• The Definition – any compulsive-like behavior that interferes with normal living and causes significant negative consequences
• Similar physiological responses in the brain
• Can anything become an addiction?
• Difficulties
  – Many behaviors are “sanctioned” by society
  – Lack of established diagnostic criteria

Why is this Important?

• The connection between chemical and process addictions (cross-addiction and co-addiction)
• The new “gateway” – behaviors often occur prior to the first chemical use
• Shame/guilt leads to chemical use (to “medicate”)
Addictive Disorder Criteria

- Tolerance
- Withdrawal
- Greater quantity or intensity than intended
- Unsuccessful attempts at cutting back/stopping
- Time spent (preparing, engaging, recovering)
- Loss in other life domains
- Continued despite significant consequences
- Elements of:
  - Secrecy
  - Use as an escape
  - Illegal activities

Common and Problematic Process Addictions

Food Addiction

- Commonly known as Obesity, Anorexia or Bulimia
  - 14 million affected
  - Obsessive relationship with food, weight, calories, etc.
  - Individuals may experience
    - Difficulties distinguishing between feelings/hunger
    - Difficulties describing and labeling feelings
    - Issues of control
  - The "relationship" represses: Anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, social anxiety, passivity
- Probability of recovery ranges between 17 and 77%
Addiction to Gambling
- Included in the DSM-IV under Pathological Gambling 312.37.
- 6 – 9 million affected
- Consequences:
  - Loss of marriage and family, decreased self esteem, incarceration, loss of job, depression, suicidal ideation
  - Withdrawal results in restlessness and irritability
  - Gamble to escape problems and relieve stress

Sexual Addiction
- Sexually-related, compulsive behaviors that interfere with normal living and cause severe stress
- Individuals learn to rely on sex for comfort from pain, for nurturing, or to relieve stress
- 17–37 million affected
- Three levels
  - Level 1 – compulsive masturbation, pornography, multiple sexual partners
  - Level 2 – exhibitionism or voyeurism
  - Level 3 – sexual acts that are abusive to others

Addiction to Spending
- Chronic repetitive purchasing that becomes a primary response to negative events or feelings
- The “purchase on credit” mentality
- Common feelings: depression, anxiety, frustration, and low self-esteem
- Possible consequences: financial destruction of the individual or their family, legal issues (shoplifting, embezzlement, or bad check writing)
Addiction to Exercise

- Exercise encompasses thoughts and moods and dictates lives
- Predispositions – low self-esteem, body dissatisfaction and eating disorders
- Individuals often
  - Lie about their exercise patterns
  - Disregard sickness and injury
  - Experience withdrawal symptoms (anxiety, irritation, and depression)

Internet Addiction

- 17–41 million people may qualify as compulsive surfers
- Includes elements of tolerance, withdrawal, craving, and negative life consequences
- Addictions that co-occur with this disorder include spending, gambling, and sexuality.
- Why it is so enticing: The Triple A Engine
  - Accessible
  - Anonymous
  - Affordable

Other Process Addictions

- Video Games
- Religion
- Television
- Work
- Relationships
- Shoplifting
- And the list goes on…
Unique Qualities of Process Addictions

- Diagnosis
  - Modified DSM-IV criteria
  - Clinical criteria (resulting from assessment)
- Does labeling help or hinder treatment?
- Holistic and concurrent treatments are necessary

Critiques of “Process Addictions”

- These disorders are extensions of current DSM-IV disorders and do not need new classifications
- The moral model: individuals willfully choose to engage in these behaviors
- The Purists: labeling these diseases as addictions diminishes the disease model

Proponents of “Process Addictions”

- These behaviors meet the criteria for dependence when measured by DSM-IV standards
- 12-step programs for these behaviors suggest they are as serious as AOD dependence
- An increase in focus and research on these problems may reduce stigma and provide a framework for treatment
But is there something even deeper?

• Core addictions
  – Addictions to Sensation
    • Crisis and Chaos
    • Emotions
  – Addictions to Power
    • Controlling people and events
  – Addictions to Suffering
    • Co-dependency, people pleasing
    • Suffering for others

How it might look…

Prevention and Treatment

• Should have similar goals as AOD:
  – ID behaviors and goals, help initiate change, follow up and relapse prevention
  – Focus on connection between client’s inability to regulate tension and pattern of discharging tension through unwanted behavior
  – Include family, group and individual therapy whenever possible
  – Encourage 12-step support group attendance
Self-Injurious Behaviors (SIB)

- Skin cutting, burning, and self-hitting
- Two types
  - Episodic – limited throughout the lifespan
  - Repetitive – reoccurring, addictive-like, incorporated
- Co-occurring problems
  - Personality Disorders
  - Eating disorders
  - Posttraumatic stress disorder
  - Dissociative disorders

Self-Injurious Behaviors

- Established early in adolescence
- Rates – 14%–39% (general pop.) vs. 40%–61% (clinical pop.), 75% female
- Relief from unpleasant experiences and feelings:
  - Depersonalization
  - Severe anxiety
  - Intense anger
  - Depression
  - Hallucinations
  - Perceived external/internal flaws
  - Racing thoughts/rapidly fluctuating emotions
  - Boredom and stimulus deprivation
  - Feelings such as loneliness, emptiness, and insecurity

SIB – Assessment

- Determine the reason and form appropriate interventions (4 most common):
  - Automatic-negative reinforcement – used to reduce tension
  - Automatic-positive reinforcement – used to create feelings
  - Social-negative reinforcement – used to escape task demands
  - Social-positive reinforcement – used to gain attention
Future Implications

• The connection between addictions
  – Internet and Sexual Addiction
    • Impacts on communication
    • Impacts on offender rates
    • Impacts on divorce rates
  – Eating and Exercise Addictions
  – SIBs and Chemical Addictions
• Treatment will need to include a thorough assessment for process addictions