

Soft Addictions?

Soft addictions can be habits, compulsive behaviors, or recurring moods or thought patterns. Their essential defining quality is that they satisfy a surface want but ignore or block the satisfaction of a deeper need. They numb us to unfamiliar or uncomfortable feelings by substituting a superficial high, or a sense of activity, for genuine feeling or accomplishment. Rather than leaning on these temporary crutches, God wants to meet us in our places of need with help that is truly healing and satisfying. ***Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.*** Psalm 139:23-24

Many soft addictions involve necessary behaviors like eating, reading, and sleeping. They become soft addictions when we overdo them and when they are used for more than their intended purpose. Soft addictions, unlike hard ones such as drugs and alcohol, are seductive because they seem like perfectly harmless and pleasurable activities while we're engaged in them – shopping, talking on the phone, eating, or gaming. At other times we simply give in to moods and reactions and act on behalf of what we are feeling. We don't often realize how much time and energy we give to these things, both positive and negative and how they compromise the quality of our lives. Jesus came to give us life to the full and these things rob us of our daily experience of that fullness. The Bible teaches us to check everything we do in order to see if it is done in response to God's goodness, or as a substitute for God's desire to bless us. ***So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.*** (1 Corinthians 10:31 NIV)

The **motivation and the function** of our behavior determine whether or not it's healthy or a soft addiction. Are we engaging in a particular behaviour to enhance our life and our relationships or are we simply trying to numb feelings, "vegg out" and let the world go by? Are we seeking to engage with life or to escape from life? Are we inviting God's presence to fill us and teach us through a particular activity or relationship or are we looking for satisfaction that we feel we haven't gotten from God's way of living? Do we believe we are serving God's purposes with what we are doing or are we substituting this activity for comfort and distraction from discontented feelings of loneliness or anger?

So don't be misled, my dear brothers and sisters. Whatever is good and perfect comes down to us from God our Father, who created all the lights in the heavens. He never changes or casts a shifting shadow. (James 1:16-17)

Here are some clues to help us recognize if our behaviour or mood is connected to a soft addiction.

Avoiding feelings. Does a given activity or mood grant us a reprieve from our emotions, especially intense emotions? We avoid feelings by being numb. At other times we enhance the feelings we like to the exclusion of others, or even wallow in one unpleasant feeling to avoid another. We talk about negative and painful things over and over again and choose to live in that heavy emotion rather than allowing God to take us to something new and life giving.

Compulsiveness. Do we feel compelled to do something, have something, or buy something, even though we know we don't need it? This behaviour may be accompanied by a helpless, powerless feeling. We may be unable to stop or reduce the amount of time spent on a given activity. Though we may find some temporary pleasure in it, we often don't feel good about ourselves after engaging in it. We persist in following the routine, saying to ourselves, "I'll never do this again." Though we try to stop, we can't.

Denial/Rationalization. If we're defensive or make excuses for our behavior or mood, chances are it's a soft addiction. "What's so bad about a few cups of coffee, a second helping of food" is a typical rationalization. "You don't know what I'm going through. I have a right to feel this way because ..." We may deny that the hours spent surfing the Net or sitting in front of the TV are a waste of time and energy. The impulse to deny or rationalize a routine suggests a soft addiction.

Hiding the behavior. We need to beware of habits that become guilty pleasures we seek to hide. Covering up the amount of time we spend on an activity or lying to others about how we spend our time or our money are signs of soft addictions.

The problem, of course, is that these behaviours become a way of life and soft addictions become deeply ingrained. In this way, we become out of touch with our deeper self. We fail to allow God to touch us and heal us and meet our deeper needs. We move farther from God's purpose for our life and from the satisfaction of living from our full potential. We find ourselves asking: "Is this all there is?"

If you want to live a morally pure life, here's what you have to do: You have to blind your right eye the moment you catch it in a lustful leer. You have to choose to live one-eyed or else be dumped on a moral trash pile. And you have to chop off your right hand the moment you notice it raised threateningly. Better a bloody stump than your entire being discarded for good in the dump. (From Matthew 5 the Message)

God has life and freedom for us but we need to make room for it. We have to let go of the old in surrender in order to welcome and make space for the new. We have to be honest about our motivations and actions. We have to confess the truth before God about the longing or pain behind the soft addiction. We must intentionally receive the peace and blessing that God is giving in order to behave in ways that bring us closer to God rather than distance us from Him.

I have learned how to be content with whatever I have. I know how to live on almost nothing or with everything. I have learned the secret of living in every situation, whether it is with a full stomach or empty, with plenty or little. For I can do everything through Christ, who gives me strength. (Philippians 4:11-13)

Question for Reflection and Discussion

What am I doing about soft addictions? Am I owning them? Am I taking action to deal with them?

Adapted from Judith Wright, There Must Be More Than This: Finding More Life, Love, and Meaning By Overcoming Your Soft Addictions (Broadway Books, NY, 2003)