

Soft Addictions?

Step 4: We made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.

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 feelings and spiritual awareness by substituting a superficial high, or a sense of activity, for genuine feeling or accomplishment.

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 in their softness. E-mailing, shopping, and talking on the phone seem like perfectly harmless, pleasurable activities while we're engaged in them. When we realize how much time and energy we devote to them, however, we can see how they compromise the quality of our lives.

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 your behavior determine whether or not it's a soft addiction. I know a woman who is very selective in what she watches, using television as a tool to learn about life. Another woman I know vegges out in front of the television daily, channel surfing and letting the programs wash over her. She leads a tough, hectic work life, and she mistakenly believes her viewing habits relieve her of stress. As you compare the two television watchers, the differences in **motivation** and **function** are clear. The first woman's motivation revolves around very specific learning goals; the second woman's motivation is to numb herself. The first woman uses television to enhance her life; the second woman uses it to escape from her life. Here are a few clues to help you define this line and recognize that your behavior is a soft addiction:

Zoning out. One way of identifying a soft addiction is to ask if you zone out while you're doing it. When we are zoned out, we are not fully engaged. We may be checked out or have a "nobody's home" look on our face. Zoning out suggests that the goal of our activity is numbness. Although we're physically engaged in an activity, our mind is elsewhere. While this often happens when watching television, it can also occur while shopping, working, having superficial conversations, or doing other activities.

Avoiding feelings. Does a given activity or mood grant you a reprieve from your emotions, especially intense emotions?

We avoid feelings by being numb, enhancing the feelings we like to the exclusion of others, or even wallowing in one unpleasant feeling to avoid another. Many of us are uncomfortable with our deepest feelings, whether positive or negative.

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

Denial/Rationalization. If you're defensive or make excuses for your behavior, 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. 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. Beware of habits that become guilty pleasures you seek to hide. Covering up the amount of time you spend on an activity or lying to others about how you frequently spend your time or your money are signs of soft addictions.

The problem, of course, is that these things 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 meet deeper needs and move farther from our full potential and we find ourselves asking: "Is this all there is?"

God has more life and more 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 makes space for the new. "Acknowledge - Acceptance - Action" is a process of freedom I can live with God in these areas of soft addiction. Am I living the life God created me to live or am I just living clean and sober?

"Let's not pretend this is easier than it really 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)

Question for Reflection and Discussion

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