
The Power Of Positive Compulsion

William N. Penzer, Ph.D.
FL License #2497
(954) 475-1371

Compulsives take heart. There is hope for you yet. You need not resign yourself to spending the rest of your life creating "to do" lists and ritually performing a variety of above and beyond the call tasks. You are not stuck in pleasing behaviors that accommodate everyone else but yourself. You are not forced to work, drink, eat, sex, spend, gamble, love, etc. without regard to limits, boundaries and the like. You can overcome your own programs and find ways to control the surging urges. You do not have to spend years in psychotherapy altering yourself and breaking free. You may, however, have to spend a few months.

The origins of compulsivity are quite clear. Genetic potentials were whipped into shape by a gale force of anxiety and insecurity. Compulsions are born of neurochemistry and emotional chemistry. Though needs to stay in control are strong, compulsive behavior typically runs out of control. Beneath those control needs are all types of suppressed feelings that produce anxiety and discomfort. These in turn foster compulsive behaviors or obsessive thoughts designed to hold things together - a form of emotional crazy glue.

No wonder compulsives have strong needs to be in control. No wonder that in seeking to be in total control, compulsives can become strongly out of control in at least one significant zone of their lives. This paradox is always present in people with compulsive problems as well as those

who are wrestling with anxiety, panic or phobia. Intrusive and serious symptoms represent out of control "controls".

Taking Control Compulsively

The control issue is a common theme of emotional distress. It reigns supreme from the bedroom to the boardroom and all stops in between. There is hardly a person around who isn't desperately searching for greater control over some aspect of self. For a "co-dependent no more" society we certainly have more than our fair share of crutches on which we addictively lean. For a people who want so much to be in control, so many are strongly out of control.

To truly break free of our unhealthy compulsions we need to accept our basic nature and use it to our advantage. We can, if we chose, seek to get rid of our underlying compulsive natures. I wish you luck. If you are twelve years old or less you have a shot. If you are older prepare for much frustration. The odds, contrary to what a Freudian analyst might tell you, are against you. It is likely that despite all rational, reasonable arguments and self-talk to the contrary, compulsivity will win every round.

I want to quickly underscore that learning to control self-destructive compulsions is very possible within a therapeutic environment or through self-determination. Millions of miraculous stories testify to the power of the human spirit. While control can

be achieved, the compulsives basic nature will continue to take shape in other forms.

My hope is that you can learn to use your compulsive nature to your advantage by becoming positively compulsed. Here's a simple example. Addictive personalities have the potential to become addicted to anything. Witness AA/NA converts who go rapidly from booze to schmooze (90 meetings in 90 minutes). They go to meetings regularly and addictively. Beyond the big Blue Book and big pot of coffee lies the phenomenon of symptom substitution. They've switched from six packs to twelve steps and have created a positive instead of a negative addiction. Mazel Tov! I hope they go to meetings forever. It is a healthy compulsion. That's all we really want. People to fight and switch, instead of swallowing the bait (and beer) and wallowing in cess and self-defeat. We can learn much from such alternative compulsivity. That people succeed in moving to more positive compulsions gives us reason to be optimistic for ourselves.

Just as some are currently addicted to chocolate cake, run raisin ice cream and twinkies you can be compulsed into no fat cottage cheese, carrot sticks and apples. Hold a gun to your head to eat them every day for two weeks and if you are a true compulsive, by the fifteenth day you'll be Jonesing for Lite & Lively and bobbing for apples like you wouldn't believe. Compulsives bond to almost anything

including favorite socks, the feel of drinking glasses, the shape of spoons, views, sounds, the size of ice cubes, shampoo, light bulb brightness, etc.

That being so, why not diet adherence addiction? Why not work schedule control compulsivity? And what about nicotine avoidance addicts - those who run from the smell of smoke, let alone their next puff? Consider as well check bouncers anonymous, zero balance credit card addicts and appropriate love and meaningful sexuality seekers. And what about two drink limit compulsers for those who don't want or need sobriety.

Let's take it one step further. How about compulsive emotional expressers, affirming addicts and those who can't control their need to share little kindnesses with those whom they love? How come compulsions must be negative? We can have compulsive attachments to positive influences. In fact, healthy people do just that. They say no to drugs, workaholism, calories, etc. and yes to health, happiness and harmony. Using your insecurities and low self-esteem you can terrorize yourself into wellness. Think about what you would be willing to compulsively do if it was prescribed as an alternative to your imminent death. Bet you'd eat cottage cheese until you moored. So why not now?

Must we wait to be scared straight into positive compulsion? I think not. I believe very strongly that we can find a way to channel our compulsive natures into healthy directions. I believe we can become addicted to anything - healthy or otherwise. So chose healthy. Fight for healthy. Set your goals for healthy. Just do it - addictively and healthfully!

A Prescription for Change

Change of any kind is never easy - especially for compulsives. It takes time, effort, patience and perseverance. Here are the basic steps to consider:

- Identify the present behavior to which you feel compulsively attached (ie. eating, drinking, working sexing, etc.).
- Define a precise behavioral goal for life (ie. I want to lose 40 pounds and keep it off, I never want to smoke again, I refuse an unhealthy love connection with him/her ever again).
- Find a support system (ie. diet system, nicotine patch, support group, therapist, etc.) and commit to it for 30 days.
- Generate positive expectations about the motivator (ie. nothing tastes as good as thinner will feel, I will no longer hate myself for being addicted to cigarettes, I will be free of the worry about my hurtful habits, I will not be tormented by him/her).
- Define a precise regimen (ie. no fat cottage cheese and fresh fruit every day, working to 6:33 PM and no later on Tuesday's and Thursday's, emotional avoidance of him/her).
- Force yourself to stay with the regimen in a do or DIE way for 30 days.
- Allow the natural forces of compulsion and addictive process to take hold.
- Stay with the healthy addiction for life +/- 3 years. This is obviously easier to do when your older, but give it a shot at any age.

I would like to leave room for repeated trials or extra visits to a therapist if this model does not work immediately, but I am already compulsively attached to it and addictively convinced it will work for you as well. I am confident in the power of addiction and convinced that despite its irrational basis, compulsive forces can prevail in both directions. I am hopelessly hooked on positive compulsions and striving to incorporate them. I hope you will join me in these convictions. I hope you will also leave room for extra time, repeated trials and added support. When it comes to behavioral modification it's never simple nor easy nor as fast as we would like.

Seek out positive compulsions and little by little redirect yourself toward them. Enjoy the sense of pride that goes with such self-management as well as the reduction of unnecessary stress, guilt and fear. Use those angry, frightened, fragile parts of you to empower you right into truly taking control - compulsively. Shut down your inner child voice pleading for just one more cookie . . . drink . . . casual sex partner, etc. Be the very best, positive addict you can be and thereby enjoy the last laugh - the best laugh after all.

Anyone want to join a compulsive laughers support group? Please don't laugh at the thought. In fact, please do - compulsively - for the rest of your life!