

The Myth of the Addictive Personality



Written by [Steve Rose](#)

Steve Rose, PhD, is an addiction counsellor who assists those struggling with substance abuse, gambling, gaming, and internet addiction. See- <https://steverosephd.com>



The idea of an “addictive personality” is one of the biggest myths about the cause of addiction. Rather than explaining addiction, it reinforces popular misconceptions, often stigmatizing those who suffer from an addiction.

Regardless of one’s personality, addiction can affect anyone. Although specific personality characteristics can be correlated with certain types of addiction, the idea of a single “addictive personality” grossly oversimplifies addiction.

As I explained in my article on the underlying causes of addiction, it is a complex issue with several potential contributing factors:

The underlying causes of addiction include trauma, unmet needs, or other emotionally painful experiences resulting in the desire to cope in the short-term through substances or behaviors that mask the pain, resulting in long-term harm.

With this in mind, let’s consider the various reasons why it is important to dispel the myth of the addictive personality.

There Is No Scientific Consensus

Researchers studying the correlation between personality and addiction have been unable to reach a consensus regarding a single “addictive personality.” Instead, many studies have found the importance of specific traits that may differ across each type of addiction.

Although there is no consensus regarding an addictive personality, one of the most significant traits observed in the research is low self-regulation. Low self-regulation means having difficulty controlling impulses, but it can also mean difficulty pulling oneself away from narrow areas of focus. On one end of the personality spectrum, low self-regulation can look like hyperactivity, while on the other end, low self-regulation can look like obsessive focus.

In Maia Szalavitz’s book, [Unbroken Brain](#), she analyses the past twenty years of “addictive personality” research, in addition to sharing her own experience with an addiction to heroin and cocaine. As an anxious straight-A student who always followed the rules, no one suspected she would develop an addiction. She states:

“Children who ultimately develop addictions tend to be outliers in several measurable ways. Yes, some stand out because they are antisocial and callous—but others stand out because they are overly moralistic and sensitive.”

Rather than being about a single personality type, there are various personality types associated with increased risk. These personality types are generally found on opposite extreme ends of an impulsivity spectrum. As she states:

“While those who are the most impulsive and eager to try new things are at highest risk, the odds of addiction are also elevated in those who are compulsive and fear novelty. It is extremes of personality and temperament—some of which are associated with talents, not deficits—that elevates risk. Giftedness and high IQ, for instance, are linked with higher rates of illegal drug use than having average intelligence.”

We often think of persons with low self-regulation as lacking impulse control, as in the stereotyped image of ADHD. What is often neglected is how compulsiveness, at the opposite end of the personality spectrum, is also associated with low self-regulation. Maia Szalavitz shares her personal experience with this issue:

“I had trouble stopping intellectual engagement, not starting it.”

As someone with mild work addiction, I can personally relate to this issue. From the outside, completing a PhD and writing over [80 articles](#) on this site looks like a high degree of self-regulated focus. However, I experienced it as quite the opposite. *Not* doing these things would be more difficult since it takes an active effort for me to stop doing them, similar to a person trying to stop using substances.

Luckily, this is something I have insight into, so I carefully monitor it to minimize negative impacts on other areas of my life. To learn more about this balance, check out my article on [when something becomes an addiction](#).

Although I have been able to turn this tendency into an asset, it could easily cause destruction if it results in too much neglect in other areas. Also, this tendency can easily become fixated on other addictive substances or behaviors if not kept in check.

Addiction is found in the extremes of a spectrum. Too often, addiction is classified as something you either have or don't have. Rather, you can be mildly addicted to something if it has minimal harm in your life or severely addicted to something if it has a significant negative impact.

In the same way that addiction is not merely something you have or don't have, it is a complex issue that does not look the same for everyone. Addiction is strongly associated with low self-regulation, but the way low self-regulation manifests looks different for everyone.

A 2018 [study](#) on the personality profiles of addiction found that different types of addiction attract different types of personality. Regarding these trends, the study found the following:

- *Alcohol use disorders identified by lower extraversion and openness to experience.*
- *Drug use disorders and compulsive sexual behavior have similar personalities.*
- *Gambling disorder has similar personality to healthy controls.*

These correlations provide further evidence against the idea of a single “addictive personality.” It is also interesting to note that persons with an addiction to gambling did not differ from the personality of the general non-addicted population. Regarding gambling disorder, the study concludes:

“...treatment centers and counselors may need to address environmental issues in these individuals, rather than focusing exclusively on risky personality traits.”

I'd go even further to argue that although there are some general trends in personality differences between various types of addiction, it is always necessary to treat individuals based on their unique personality traits, character strengths, and personal histories.

Although the science is relatively clear on the importance of self-regulation in addiction, even this concept manifests quite differently across each individual. There is no substitute for a person-centered approach to addiction.

It Does Not Explain Addiction

Rather than clarifying why someone may have developed an addiction, the concept of the addictive personality obscures the underlying causes, reducing everything to a perceived personality defect. Like the myth of a single “addiction gene,” we tend to seek simple answers to complex questions. In doing so, we gain certainty at the cost of genuine understanding. Although an array of genetic factors may contribute to an increased risk of developing an addiction, there is no single addiction gene.

These simplistic single-origin explanations label persons with addiction as fundamentally different. This false certainty can give the illusion that one is immune from developing an addiction if one does not exhibit certain traits.

The concept of an “addictive personality” is a convenient way to package addiction's messy reality into the black box of a pseudo-psychological label. The concept's explanatory power is equivalent to saying, “they have an addiction because they are an addict.”

Addiction is caused by various factors and the concept of an “addictive personality” erases this reality by simply attributing all addiction to a single variable. As shared in my article on [what drives addiction](#):

“Addiction is driven by neurological changes related to dopamine, the reward center, and the brain’s self-regulatory center. This produces a learned pattern of coping with underlying pain or unmet needs.”

This brief explanation does not even scratch the surface, so check out the [full article](#) for further detail if you are interested.

It Can Be Stigmatizing

Such superficial explanations are also stigmatizing. An example can be seen in the stereotyped concept of the “degenerate gambler.” Like the idea of the “addictive personality,” concepts like “addict” often carry the weight of judgmental attitudes. Although persons in 12-step recovery may choose to identify themselves as a “gambler, alcoholic, or an addict,” it is not anyone else’s place to bestow such a label.

I interact with “persons with an addiction” in the same way I would interact with “persons with depression.” I wouldn’t walk into a mental health rehabilitation unit and refer to the clients as “depressives.” The comparison is not perfect because the “addict” labels have become normalized in 12-step recovery, but using the label for oneself is a personal choice.

When these labels are appropriately internalized in the context of 12-step recovery, they can be empowering. When they are given to you by someone else, they can feel alienating. Introducing oneself as an addict at a Narcotics Anonymous meeting feels very different than someone else saying, “You’re an addict.” The former indicates acceptance and the desire to maintain abstinence, whereas the latter often suggests judgment and misunderstanding.

The concept of an addictive personality can serve as a permanent mark of “defectiveness,” taking away hope in a situation already marked by a lack of hope. As shared in my article on [stigma](#), Stephanie described her constant fear of judgment while in active addiction.

“I was hopeless and believed that I would not be able to get help. In my own head, I was a lost cause.”

When someone feels judged, they are less likely to reach out for help, prolonging their struggle with addiction. The concept of the addictive personality may contribute to this issue when the label is perceived as a form of judgment.

Conclusion

The concept of the addictive personality has been one of the most stubborn myths in the addiction field. Although persons lacking self-regulation are at an increased risk of addiction, issues in this area range from hyperactivity and impulsiveness to obsessiveness and compulsivity.

Each type of addiction has a different general trend in personality traits. Although this is the case, these trends are still not necessarily useful in clinical settings where each individual brings their unique cluster of personality traits, character strengths, and personal histories.

Lastly, relying on the concept of an addictive personality can be stigmatizing since it tends to be an overgeneralization based on a set of stereotyped negative characteristics.

The concept of an addictive personality is not useful for explaining addiction, nor is it helpful in treating addiction. As described in my article on [the root causes of addiction](#), the causes of addiction include trauma, pain, and unmet needs such as purpose, belonging, and self-esteem. As in the insightful words of Gabor Maté:

“The question is not why the addiction, but why the pain.”