

# Agency and Addiction

By Ben Erwin

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*No matter what  
your current  
circumstances,  
there is hope!*

In my role as a counselor and manager of the Church's Addiction Recovery Program, I have seen many people overcome the devastating effects of addiction. I have seen spouses and other family members find peace and healing. These experiences have shown me that

*there is nothing  
"too hard for the Lord"*

(Genesis 18:14). No matter what your current circumstances are, or what your loved one is going through, there is hope! Here are a handful of principles about addiction that might help you in your journey.

## An Honest Evaluation

It can be difficult to admit that addiction is present in our lives. The word *addiction* is often associated with fear, stigma, shame, anger, and pain. How do we know if the word *addiction* even describes what is happening?

To answer that question, it's important to be honest about our behaviors. Those who struggle with addiction have a tendency to lie to themselves about how much power the behavior has. "This isn't a big deal" or "I can quit anytime I want to" are common phrases people hide behind to avoid facing the truth. The Church's Addiction Recovery Program is adapted from 12-step programs used in secular addiction recovery meetings. In all of them, honesty is the first step. It is so important to

*be honest about our  
problems and admit  
we need help.*

Only when we are honest will we be empowered to finally access what we need.

It's important to mention that some of us may believe we are addicted when, in fact, we are not. Addiction is not the same as feeling curious after accidentally viewing pornography, for example, or succumbing to an occasional bad habit. "If behavior is incorrectly classified as an addiction, the user

may think he or she has lost agency and the capacity to overcome the problem,” taught President Dallin H. Oaks, First Counselor in the First Presidency. “On the other hand, having a clearer understanding of the depth of a problem—that it may not be as ingrained or extreme as feared—can give hope and an increased capacity to exercise agency to discontinue and repent.”<sup>1</sup>

If you have questions about whether you have a habit, a compulsion, or an addiction,

*prayerfully reach out  
to someone you trust.*

Talk to them about your concerns. Consider asking your bishop to help you connect with counselors in your area. Secrecy is not the answer to any of these problems. Choose now to start healing.

### **Each Choice Is a Chance**

Addiction is a disease which compromises our ability to choose. As President Boyd K. Packer (1924–2015), President of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, once taught: “Addiction has the capacity to disconnect the human will and nullify moral agency. It can rob one of the power to decide.”<sup>2</sup>

However, while addiction restricts freedom, I don’t think we ever really lose our God-given agency completely. No matter where

an addiction has taken us, we can still choose to turn to Heavenly Father for direction and help. For example, while we can’t control when or where cravings or compulsions come, or how powerful they might be, we can control other simple choices, such as:

- What will I pray about today?
- How can I point my heart to God?
- What healthy coping skill could I practice right now?
- Which support group meeting should I participate in today?

We don’t have to be overwhelmed. We can simply

*ask God to help us see  
the next right decision*

and ask for the power to do it. Little by little, we can use our agency to move us closer to God and recovery—or not. If we misuse our agency, we move further from Him and back into our addictions.

### **Many Parts Need Healing**

Addiction hurts us in many different ways. It impacts our minds as we depend on addiction to manage hard situations. It damages our spirits as we choose behavior that goes against the commandments of God. Addiction often walks hand in hand with difficult emotions and damaged relationships. All of these parts of us need healing.

## The good news is that recovery is possible

for our mind, heart, and body. Similar to the way someone with diabetes acknowledges they must monitor their blood sugar, take medication, and see a doctor when needed, we need to get the best help we can. The healing process involves developing new skills, strengthening meaningful connections with others, and relying on the Lord. Sometimes, seeking help from a counselor or doctor is necessary. In addition, the Church's Addiction Recovery Program offers free confidential support groups. Those with addiction are not bad people learning to be good; they are ill people learning to be healthy.

### Change Is Possible

Some of us who have addiction find it helpful to identify ourselves as an “addict” because this label can remind us of where we’ve been. We realize that we will be vulnerable to addiction throughout our life and accept that we must stick to the routines that protect us. As we come unto Christ, we strengthen our faith and confidence that we are sons and daughters of God. Focusing on our divine identity helps us progress in recovery and fully heal, while labeling ourselves by any mortal standard can be harmful.

The mentality of “once an addict, always an addict” can prevent us from allowing Jesus Christ to change us. The second step in the Addiction Recovery Program is hope. As the workbook states, “Come to believe that the power of God can restore you to complete spiritual health.”<sup>3</sup> We should

*never limit the Lord's ability to heal.*

As the scriptures testify, “mighty change” is possible through the Atonement of Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Ghost (see Mosiah 3:19; 5:2). We all have to endure challenges here on earth, but God can ultimately heal us from any pain we experience.

### Moving Forward Together

Let's all work together to reduce the shame and stigma surrounding addiction. We can do this by making sure we understand—and help those around us understand—our divine identity and purpose on earth. We can also be honest about our struggles and create a safe environment for others to be honest as well. Perhaps most important, we can honor the power and ability of Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ to heal every single person. Because of Them, there is *always* hope! ■

#### NOTES

1. Dallin H. Oaks, “Recovering from the Trap of Pornography,” *Ensign*, Oct. 2015, 34–35.
2. Boyd K. Packer, “Revelation in a Changing World,” *Ensign*, Nov. 1989, 14.
3. *Addiction Recovery Program: A Guide to Addiction Recovery and Healing* (2005), 7.

#### READ MORE

For additional information, see “How can I tell if I am addicted?” at [ChurchofJesusChrist.org/study/manual/help-for-me/recognizing-addiction](http://ChurchofJesusChrist.org/study/manual/help-for-me/recognizing-addiction).