



**MUSIC**  
**SPORTS**



# **CREATING POSITIVE ADDICTIONS**

Positive Addictions Are  
Actually Life-Affirming



**HOBBIES**  
Can All Be Addictive!

**W**hen we hear the word “addiction,” most of us naturally conjure up some fairly negative images. Perhaps we think of an alcoholic passed out in a gutter, or of a drug addict overdosing in an inner-city crack house. But what about people who claim they are addicted to exercise and other positive activities?



Psychiatrist William Glasser first explored the idea that certain addictive behaviours may actually be good for you in his 1976 book, *Positive Addictions*. He suggested that activities like running, meditating or swimming could be “addictive” for people who engaged in them on a regular basis. Unlike negative addictions (drinking, taking drugs, gambling, smoking, etc.), these positive addictions are actually life-affirming.



What is it that makes these activities addictive? People who are addicted to a positive activity do it because it is something they enjoy and crave. For example, many runners feel that the time they spend running is the high point of their day. When they are unable to carry out their daily run, due to injuries or family obligations, they feel a sense of discomfort and are vaguely uneasy.

## Negative Addictions

People who drink regularly often talk about getting a “buzz” - a mild feeling of euphoria where they are happy in their surroundings. They often keep drinking to maintain that buzz. They want to remain in this addicted state, partly because they enjoy the experience, and partly because they dread the inevitable hangover that will result when they sober up.



The goal of most people with negative addictions, whether they are addicted to alcohol, drugs, gambling or sex - is to keep that feeling of euphoria going for as long as possible by wrapping themselves in a “bubble” where they are free from the problems in their life. When they are in that bubble, addicts can be completely different from their normal selves. Their values and their judgment are completely altered as they strive to remain in the bubble at all costs. The consequences of their actions are inconsequential. Rational thinking is tossed out the window and addicts are completely ruled by their compulsions. They are dishonest with themselves, they distort reality, they constantly try to justify their behaviour, and they completely minimize the results of their actions.



An alcoholic may go to incredible lengths to satisfy his addiction. He may be willing to lose his job, his car, his house, his family - he may even put his life at risk - just to get his next drink. The desire for alcohol is overwhelming and completely dominates his existence, while everything else in life takes a back seat. Alcoholic's Anonymous tells members that “one drink is too many, and a thousand is never enough.” This statement perfectly sums up the way people with negative addictions let their lives be ruled by the addiction - there is no such thing as enough.





Positive addictions, on the other hand, do not completely dominate a person's life. Instead of detracting from other activities in their lives - they actually contribute in a beneficial way. Take the example of a woman who is addicted to meditation. Perhaps friends will ask her "if you enjoy meditation so much, why don't you do it all day long?" Quite frankly, she doesn't need to. A half-hour or an hour a day may be all it takes for her to achieve the results she wants. She attains a sense of peace and contentment while she is meditating, and this in turn helps her to cope with the rest of her daily activities.

Another difference between negative addictions and positive addictions is the fact that while negative addictions are passive - positive addictions are active. When an alcoholic takes a few drinks to get a buzz, he's letting the alcohol do all the work. Drug addicts rely on different substances to help them get high, while gamblers who are addicted to Video Lottery Terminals get a rush only when they are playing these machines. In all of these cases, the addicts rely on an external stimulus to help them achieve the addicted state.



But positive addictions are something that "addicts" do by themselves, and for themselves - and there are no hangovers or withdrawal symptoms when the activity is over. Runners may get an adrenaline rush from their activity, but they don't feel depressed when the activity is over. In fact, quite the opposite is usually true. Many people who run every morning report that they feel energized and enthusiastic for the rest of the day.

### **Not An 'Obligation'**

Bodybuilders often use the phrase "No Pain, No Gain" to describe the commitment necessary to excel in their sport. They feel that they have to endure an unpleasant experience if they are going to succeed. We've all been exposed to this sort of philosophy at some point in our lives. When we were young, our parents often told us "eat your vegetables, they're good for you!" Or perhaps they told us "of course the medicine tastes bad - it has to taste bad if it's going to work properly."

There are a fair number of people who go to gyms and exercise regularly when they would rather be someplace else (perhaps lying on a couch with a bag of potato chips watching television). They force themselves to work out to maintain a certain body weight - but it's not an experience that they enjoy. In cases like this, exercise may be a good habit - but it's not a positive addiction. It has to be something a person craves and looks forward to - it can't be viewed as an obligation or a "necessary evil."



In *Positive Addictions*, William Glasser points to the example of one young man who began running competitively when he was in high school and college - then simply ran for fun when he graduated from college. When he missed a practice in college, he would feel the sense of relief that a child might experience when he was playing hooky to get out of doing a boring task. But once he was simply running for fun, this young man would feel a vague sense of discomfort any time he had to miss his daily run.

When he was in college, running was an obligation, and not necessarily one that he enjoyed. But running became a positive addiction for him when he got out of college because it was something that he did for his own enjoyment.



### Not About Competition

As human beings, we are naturally very competitive creatures. We always want to win, regardless of whether we are at work or play. This spirit of competition can drive us to be more successful in our careers and recreational activities - but it can also drive up our blood pressure if we are too critical about our own shortcomings.



Activities like running, swimming and weight-training can all be positive addictions - but they cease to be positive addictions if we are too competitive or too self-critical. Positive addictions should help us to deal with problems and escape from stress in our lives - not create additional stress. William Glasser found that most of the people who listed running as a positive addiction tended to do the majority of their running when they were alone. This meant that they weren't trying to compete with other runners. They also weren't timing themselves and constantly trying to beat their own personal best times. They were taking part in their positive addiction for the sheer joy of the activity. The fact that it had a positive impact in many other areas of their life was simply an added bonus.