

## Addictive Thinking *By Abraham J. Twerski*

In my work treating alcoholics, I discovered a phenomenon which I call "addictive thinking." While this thinking pattern is more pronounced and more easily discernable in the alcoholic, it occurs in many non-alcoholics as well. Addictive thinking results in a cycle of self-deception that has a great impact on one's life.

Addictive thinking often involves denial, rationalization and/or projection. Denial is a tactic used by the subconscious to protect a person from that which would be too painful for him to bear. The subconscious does this by blocking awareness. It is much like the person who faints from acute pain, which is nature's way of providing anesthesia.

Thus, while it may be obvious to any observer that the alcoholic is

destroying himself, his job and his family through his incessant drinking, the alcoholic himself may be totally oblivious to this. He does not necessarily lie about his drinking. He is actually unaware of the extent of his drinking, or that his problems are the result of it. Hence, he cannot understand why people are so critical of his behavior.

*We would be wise to recognize that we are all vulnerable to addictive thinking.*

We often use denial. Parents may be in denial about their child's use of drugs. A woman may be in denial about the lump in her breast. An abusive husband may be in denial about his destructive behavior. A businessman may be in denial about his participation in a dishonest transaction.

When a person in denial is confronted with the truth, he often resorts to "rationalizing" to keep the denial intact. Rationalization consists of finding a semi-logical explanation to account for what is happening. For

example, the parents of a youngster who is having mood swings and is doing poorly in his studies (due to his drug use) may rationalize their son's behavior by finding fault with the school. A woman who discovers a lump in her breast may decide that since four years earlier, a similar lump was discovered and found to be a benign cyst, this lump must also be benign. A woman may rationalize her husband's abusive behavior by saying, "He is really a gentle person. I must be doing something to provoke him." The human mind is ingenious at finding justifications for virtually anything.

King Solomon gave a perfect description of the tendency to rationalize: "All of a person's ways are right in his own eyes" (Proverbs 16:2).

Another way of maintaining the denial is to "project" the blame for what is happening onto others: whatever is going wrong is somebody else's fault. So, for example, the abuser rationalizes his behavior by claiming that his wife is making unrealistic demands and does not understand the tension he is experiencing at work.

Ironically, the alcoholic is at an advantage. Ultimately, his drinking will lead him to what psychiatrists refer to as "hitting rock bottom." This is when he reaches the crisis point,

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comes face-to-face with his alcoholism and is unable to keep on denying the reality. The non-alcoholic is not as fortunate. Although he may be just as self-deceptive as the alcoholic, he may never hit "rock-bottom" and thus, never be forced into seeing reality. He may never realize that he has been spending years deceiving himself as well as others.

In *The Path of the Just*, the Ramchal describes denial and rationalization and warns against the treachery of allowing our desires to distort our judgment. "One who is a captive of his desires (*yetzer*) does not see and cannot recognize the truth...like one who walks in the dark and cannot see the pitfalls in the way...they find strong proofs [for] the validity of their distorted concepts" (Chapter 3).

How can we avoid addictive thinking? Rabbi Yisrael of Rizhin was asked by a *chassid* for a rule of thumb to guide him through life. Rabbi Yisrael replied, "Emulate a tightrope walker. A tightrope walker is able to balance himself so well because when he feels himself leaning to the left, he immediately bends toward the right. Similarly, whenever you have a strong desire for something, recognize that it is often a physical rather than a spiritual urge; physical urges are like bribes that can distort one's judgment. Be like the tightrope walker—lean a bit to the other direction. Try and find reasons why you should *not* give in to your urges. Better yet, share your thoughts with an objective person."

We would be wise to recognize that we are all vulnerable to addictive thinking. We should utilize the "tightrope walker" technique. Furthermore, we should try to adhere to the advice given in *Ethics of the Fathers*: we should acquire for ourselves mentors and friends. Their objective observations may help us avoid erroneous judgments.

To deceive another is morally and ethically wrong. To deceive oneself is not only wrong, but most foolish. 