

The Addicts' Ghetto: Chemical and Social Issues

**Armando Maliano
September 28, 2002**

One of the most important challenges facing our society today is how to address the problem of drug and alcohol addiction. For addicts seeking recovery, relapse is often a recurrent problem with tragic effects. In order to understand the addict's difficulty in recovery, we need to better understand the underpinnings of relapse. The addict in recovery faces a host of physical and social challenges any one of which can precipitate relapse, and when taken collectively, stack the cards against success.

To understand the physical effects of drugs upon the nervous system and the brain, we need to understand that drugs mimic the chemicals at the synapse that trigger the brain to produce chemicals that produce the high.

The two categories of drugs predominantly taken by addicts are the opiates and the amphetamines. The opiates affect the brain's "drugstore" of chemicals to produce dopamine, endorphins and serotonin (to mention a few) which produce a reduced awareness of reality, along with particular feelings of pleasure, analgesia, and a sense of well-being. The amphetamines affect the brain's drugstore to produce norepinephrin which produces the pleasurable feelings of energy, excitement and concentration. Although not physically addictive, other psychoactive drugs, for example hallucinogens like peyote, LSD, mescaline, marijuana, can be a very strong habit along with other drugs of choice.

Drugs are taken either by swallowing, injecting, smoking or skin popping all of which deliver the drug to the bloodstream in varying amounts of time with injection being the quickest.

Generally speaking, addicts remember their first high as a very special pleasure. One of the effects of that first high is that it tricks the brain into producing an effect that is exaggerated. The brain cannot keep producing that special intense pleasure and therefore requires a larger dose of drug to re-experience it. What happens is that a physical tolerance to the drug is developed which means when the user is lacking the drug, he doesn't feel right. He feels sick. The unpleasant opposite of the high happens to the body.

What has happened is that the drug's psychoactive affect upon the brain is a "hijacking" of the brain's drugstore of serotonin, endorphin, and so on. The drug chemically fools the brain into not producing as much of that particular hijacked chemical on its own. So now, just to feel normal, the user becomes dependent upon the drug.

The pattern of drug addiction begins with experimentation, followed by habituation, wanting to feel good, which turns into a compulsion. This compulsion is a psychoneurotic reaction

characterized by a persistent impulse to think certain thoughts or to carry out certain actions. Addiction is a very primitive and very powerful thing.

The addict becomes compulsive and has lost control of his use. When it was a habit, he could decide to not use his drug on a particular day. With experimentation and habituation, he still had some control but with compulsion, he has lost that ability and needs help to get back to some kind of normalcy.

During periods of stress or withdrawal, the compulsion to use becomes particularly irresistible. The compulsion multiplies to a point where thoughts of using again dominate the entire waking life of the addict. There seems to be no other way out for the addict but to repeat the cycle. The same process happens with amphetamines, alcohol and other drugs. And, it is often the case, that when an addict can't get his drug of choice, he will use another drug. The addict is doomed to repeat the cycle over and over again looking for the high.

The physical part of the addict's compulsion makes it very difficult for the addict to understand his own behavior. When all the addict can think about is to get himself high because he doesn't feel good, he forgets how he felt in his normal life before the addiction. He can remember that he felt good but he forgets how it felt when he was without the drug – what he suffered from withdrawal. He forgets that when he is high.

Another factor of addiction is the addict's denial that the reality of their compulsion is not real. The addict has magical thinking. He thinks that he can quit anytime he wants without effect. That is simply not true and the addict soon finds out that there is a price to pay for his addiction.

This leads into the social factors underpinning relapse. The addict's world can be viewed as a ghetto. A ghetto is defined as a section of a city where members of a minority live. If we apply that to the world of addiction from the point of view of an addict, it fits quite well since the addicts' world is a mental and emotional ghetto. The safety of a ghetto is that we are all alike in this ghetto. Addicts learn to associate with other addicts to the exclusion of other normal socializing. This in turn becomes the addict's reality that he is not alone for there are other people around who are like him. The ghetto compliments the addict's internal world.

When someone is addicted, they have a different personality than they had before they were addicted. And as addicts, this personality helps them fit in to the addicted subculture which has its own language, behaviors and codes of ethics. To recover means to move back into a different culture quite literally, the mainstream culture, which has very different rules, language, codes of behavior and ethics. This is a very powerful and scary move.

The desire for being connected to a group or a family in the subculture is very strong but since the compulsion to drugs overrules everything, an addict cannot develop those connections to becoming something more real. So the mistrust in an addict's world is due to the fact the drug is the most important thing to the addict. Everything including family, health, finances, friendships, work, etc., is secondary so it is, in fact, a lonely place for an addict. It is just him and his drug.

So, when the addict begins recovery and his drugs are taken away, he can perceive that there is nothing. We all have what we call normal remembrance of life from one incident to the next and to the next. This life is backed up by the reality of what has actually happened – it is a history. That history moves on without you when you become addicted and part of the subculture. Linear, grounded, socially connected reality and processes of normal growth and change go on for others without you. There is a real loss there and when an addict works for his recovery, he has a lifelong task of healing and catching up. It is depressing to look back and see what you have missed and that can drive an addict back to drug use. That makes the addiction ghetto seem to be a safe place to be.

What makes the ghetto so strong is that there is a denial inside the addict that the ghetto exists. He is not aware of the external forces of the lifestyle. The addict can be bright, smart and capable but he only knows how to use it in the ghetto of drug addiction. It doesn't apply to the future or to the past or to the world out there....just to the immediacy of the now moment....a life lived for instant gratification.

The ghetto is very seductive in that it allows for negativity and dysfunction to become acceptable and normal in the addict culture which makes a whole lot of things easier for the addict.

Addicts play the deprivation game in which they glamorize their deprivation so that people will respond to them and give them what they want. That game is adolescent in nature and other major forces of the ghetto, such as immediate gratification and extreme self-centeredness, are also adolescent. The ghetto is very adolescent in its understanding of reality. When an addict attempts recovery, these forces are in the addict's way.

Addicts talk about cleaning up but they don't realize the price they have to pay such as painful awareness, being out of step, having to catch up, discomfort, and self consciousness. Each thing they have to do to reconnect with the mainstream is actually a very major move in their life. A part of relapse is being overwhelmed by those very steps that need to be taken to get one's life in order. The shadow forces of the ghetto interfere with judgment and planning of moves with little steps that help you feel successful and encouraged to continue recovery.

Getting back into the mainstream means that the addict has to remember what he forced himself to forget when he discovered through experimentation, that he could put those troubles aside. That became habituating and led to addiction. At that point of his beginning to use drugs, the very thing that saved him is the very thing that is going to kill him. Giving up addiction, he has to start back at square one and face all of those issues initially avoided.

Some revealed issues can be very disturbing such as having an emotional disorder like manic/depression or physical health problems such as diabetes. This necessitates a lot of help in recovery to look at all of these facets of the addict's situation. It is easy to understand how an addict would feel better about being an addict with illusions of control of his addiction than to face the revealed underlying realities.

Another factor in relapse is that our culture supports addiction via commercials to self medicate and experience instant gratification in order to feel better. So, the addict is fighting triggers from

which he cannot get away. Being used to having the alcohol or drugs filter your feelings of reality is what an addict becomes accustomed to and when reality is unfiltered, it is very stressful and creates anxiety because the addict in recovery is not used to it. They are not used to feeling normal anxiety and want to medicate everything little thing. Also, the drugs desensitize the

addict's nervous system and during recovery, their nervous system goes to the other extreme – becoming highly sensitized. It is like their nervous system is now raw and hypersensitive. This makes relapse predictable.

Some motivations to enter detox and into recovery are an inability to keep up the addiction, family pressures, realization that even with getting high, life is not good and is getting worse; an overdose, an appeal from loved ones, and the realization that they are in physical and moral danger with their lifestyle because the drug culture is predatory.

One of the phases in recovery that is not talked about much is what I call “limbo” and it is a very difficult state to be in for the addict. It is a virtual “no man’s land” where you are not connected to either the old drug life or the new normal life. In limbo, the addict is really alone, more so than ever before because the skills he learned in the ghetto, don’t apply and he hasn’t learned new skills to create a new social life, new job, friends, etc. Sometimes he just doesn’t have the courage to really go through with it and he may get scared and return to the old familiar drug life. The trigger here is the addict seeking a sense of well being that cannot be felt in limbo.

Another feature of the limbo phase is anhedonia, the inability to feel pleasure. This is due to the addict’s depletion through drug use of the normal amounts of neurochemicals produced by the brain that produce good feelings. The addict in recovery is looking for pleasure rewards from his accomplishments but the brain is depleted of those neurochemicals and needs time to replenish itself. This obviously can be very discouraging to the addict because he does not understand that this is going to happen and will take some time. The addict wonders, “If I am doing well, how come I don’t feel good?” That disappointment combined with the state of anhedonia and the recovering addict’s situation of being in between two worlds and not belonging in either one, combine to make a very powerful pull toward relapse.

In addition, there are other factors about limbo that add to the difficulty for an addict to successfully complete the journey to health. Limbo can take a long time; there is no way to predict how long it will last. It is different for everybody and it does not gradually reassure the addict with subtle predictable increases in rewards along the way. The addict in limbo is trying to change everything but without the reward he had in the drug addiction ghetto. It sends people into relapse. An addict is like plastic. You warm it....that is change. You quit warming it....it goes back to that original shape.

A measure of health that I have learned to look for is when someone’s thinking, and their feelings and their behavior all go together. That is how I understand well being – living life in harmony with who you are. The brain’s drugstore will reward you with good neurochemicals for that. Even under normal circumstances, that is a hard place for anybody to get to and to sustain, so imagine how hard it is for an addict.

One of the things that I notice about addicts going through limbo is they do not know how to say hello and they do not know how to say good-bye. This means that they are in a holding pattern.

They are in limbo and don't know which way to go. One thing they have to really accept is to give up the chemical high and reacquaint themselves with normal pleasures. To get out of the ghetto, addicts have to go through limbo and say good-bye to the chemical high.

Good recovery, in my opinion, would address all of these issues with all the other methods we have of helping addicts recover. The addict needs to be understood on many levels and my hope is that use of terms like ghetto and limbo can help them understand what they need to go through and be better equipped to avoid relapse.