

# Working With the Person Recovering from Addiction Within the Church

By Antonia van Loon RN PhD

Over recent months I have been working with recovering women who have become homeless due to their addictions, which may be attributed to their experiences of sexual abuse in childhood. Additionally, over the past few years of ministering in my faith community as a pastoral nurse I have worked with a number of people grappling with addiction. They cut across all social sectors and both genders. These people cannot experience freedom because they are enslaved to alcohol, drugs, sex, tobacco, pornography, and other damaging substances and behaviours such as food (too much, too little) and work. Many well-meaning Christians say things like 'Why don't they just stop doing it? They know it's killing them, it's damaging their life, so they should just stop doing it!' That is true, but it's not that easy to stop.

People generally slide into addiction slowly based on a series of choices that lead to substance use/misuse/abuse. These choices are based on beliefs the person holds about themselves and are heavily grounded in their childhood experiences. Most have had adverse life-changing experiences such as abuse (physical, verbal, emotional, spiritual, neglect, etc) and/or sexual assault (sexual abuse, rape, incest etc.) or a deprived family life (insufficient love, nurture, safety, acrid divorces by parents, etc). Their legitimate developmental needs in childhood have not been met. These experiences sear memories into the child's mind that playback like a faulty recording over the years. Some memories are almost impossible to erase, playing back scenarios long into adulthood that make the person feel sad, empty, confused and hurt inside. This confusion, fear, shame, guilt and blame are daily companions throughout childhood. The child develops a repertoire of coping strategies that allow survival and they take these into adulthood. As children they learn that trusting people is unsafe. They learn to disassociate from relational intimacy, fearing emotional vulnerability in a relationship because it signals danger. A major legacy of such adversity is a fragile sense of identity and problematic development of personal boundaries.

The child moves into adolescence where closer relationships are developed and they begin to experience an increased awareness of their disconnected responses and the consequent loneliness they feel. They escape such painful experiences with drugs, substances, alcohol, promiscuity etc. which numb the suffering for awhile, make them feel 'normal', and help them gain a sense of belonging by facilitating the relaxation that promotes relating. However, they wake up from their using with an increased sense of shame, guilt and pain, and some go on to develop mental and physical illness as a result of their addiction. When life's pressures build they reach for their alcohol, drugs etc. to stop the pain. Satan's deceptive trap of dependency and addiction is set.

As Horace Mann said 'Habit is cable; we weave a thread of it every day and at last we cannot break it'. It is cruel and unfair to take away the addictive substance/behaviour from dependent people without helping them to fulfil their essential life-needs in healthier ways. While there are many good recovery programs around that will help, I am convinced Christ is the only one that can heal a crushed spirit. In Jesus Christ alone will this person experience the loving, healing transformation of becoming a new creation, with a new hope. In Christ they are set free to live in freedom (Gal 5:1). They are no longer enslaved to their addiction if they allow the Holy Spirit to live within them and guide their life. Only then do they become liberated to become all God intended them to be (2 Cor 3:17). When this understanding breaks into their mind, the search for love and identity is fulfilled, because the person knows they are a much loved child of an ever-faithful, ever-present, ever-powerful, true God.

Satan is at work in our world and the biggest battle is for our hearts and minds. This battle is won in Christ (1 Cor. 2:16; 2 Cor. 10:3-5). When you have lived a childhood feeling unloved, unworthy, incapable and different somehow, your thoughts need significant reshaping for you to thrive. This

seldom changes overnight, so a ministry to addicted people requires supportive commitment and patience, seasoned with an outpouring of the fruits of the spirit. This is only achievable if you cover this work with your prayer and the prayers of your faith community.

In my pastoral nurse role I work with these people individually to help them 'feel their pain'. Metaphorically speaking, we walk through their life experiences with God holding one hand and myself (or another supportive church member) holding the person's other hand. Our aim is to help this person to 'abide in Christ' because only then will our work bear fruit (John 15:8). Christ alone breaks into their lives to set them free (Isaiah 9:6; 2 Tim. 2:24-26). The first step is always to talk issues through until the person admits they have a problem that they want to change. This requires careful and loving confrontation, once you have an established relationship with the person seeking support (Ephesians 4:15). I have found without exception that this confrontation is met with tears and relief. One woman said 'I have finally cracked the wall I built around myself and I am now starting to feel... the pain, the joy, the love... they are all like new presents I have never experienced before

I then encourage them to join either a Christian recovery program (relevant to their addiction) and a support group, or small group where they will grow their faith and understanding. This is important because the battle continues within the recovering person and they need to feel connected into a family that supports them in their faith and life journey because the feelings of guilt and unworthiness are washed away by the consistent and persistent loving support of a caring church family.

The saddest thing I hear from many recovering people who are Christian is their fear of the judgment of other Christians. They believe exposure of their addiction changes the way people perceive them within the church. The "façade of perfection" some Christians project is alienating, creating a huge stumbling block to a recovering person (Ephesians 4:25). We are all forgiven sinners, yet instead of experiencing a humble, forgiving, open, honest and loving community the person recovering from addiction can find themselves facing a group of self-righteous and judgmental people who might tolerate the person in their church building, but will seldom invite them into their home. I just ask what would Jesus' attitude/response/action be?

Unless the person in recovery concedes their need for God's grace in their life, repents from their sin and commits their life to Christ, walking daily with him (Phil 4:8-9), they will find recovery a virtual impossibility, moving instead from one program to another looking for answers, but missing the life-giving option of wholeness in Christ. The person in recovery must transform their thinking (Rom. 12:2) and replace the lies of their old thoughts about themselves with the truth of the gospel (John 16:13). They need to be encouraged to stand against temptation, to read their Bible (Col. 3:15-16), to pray so they can stand against evil (Col. 2:8). For example we live in a society where sex is used to market goods and alcohol is offered everywhere, yet the recovering person has to withstand such temptation, spending a lot of energy in mental battle with their old ways of thinking. When we have emotional experiences (pleasurable or abhorrent) attached to certain stimuli we can recall them more readily. Consequently just the thought of that stimuli can create chemical arousal e.g. thinking about a drink, or a party where drugs may be present, or a pornographic website... can trigger the physiological changes that drive craving. The recovering person feels guiltier because they think "I shouldn't be feeling like this", however feelings triggered by external stimuli are difficult to control.

The recovering person must resist (James 4:7), abstain and reduce exposure to troublesome stimuli wherever possible. They must learn new ways of thinking when feelings are aroused, so they change their response choices to life-enhancing behaviours. They must learn to renounce the lies in their head and believe God's truth... they are loved, forgiven, healed, transformed, restored and saved for eternity! This becomes easier with repetition and encouragement from other

Christians. God provides the weapons to make every thought obedient to Christ (2 Cor. 10:3-5). When we try to do it in our own strength we fail, we all have to put on the armour of God (Eph. 6:10-18) to resist Satan. Then the peace of God that passes all understanding will guard our heart and mind in Christ Jesus (Phil 4:7).

A ministry to people recovering from addiction is not easy. It takes patience and commitment, but we do not work alone. We have the power behind the universe going before us each day in every way! I can offer the love of Christ and the Holy Spirit will do the rest. What we have to offer is love and life, healing and salvation. That is what every human really wants but for the person recovering from addiction it seems like the impossible dream. We need more dream weavers to break the cables of addiction through sharing the fellowship and support of a faith community but above all sharing the healing love of Christ. Surely we all want to share that gift!

Antonia van Loon RN PhD (2005)

Pastoral Nurse

Director of Development - Australian Faith Community Nurses Association