

An Addiction/Abuse Workshop

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INTRODUCTION

This workshop description is the first chapter of John Firman and Ann Gila's book *The Primal Wound: A Transpersonal View of Trauma, Addiction, and Growth*. It follows the participants at a workshop on addiction and abuse as they uncover the core experience of primal wounding—the plunge toward nonbeing—and the resulting compulsions and addictions. Also discovered in this exploration is the quest for being that underlies these very compulsions and addictions.

*When our alive True Self goes into hiding,
a false, co-dependent self emerges to take its place.
Gradually, we begin to think we **are** that false self—
so that it becomes a habit, and finally an addiction.*

—Charles Whitfield

Over the past seven years, we have conducted workshops for professionals that address the issues of addiction and abuse. In these workshops, participants are invited to focus upon the inner experience of these two important mental health issues in order to learn about these from the inside, so to speak. What they discover is a wound that underlies not only addiction and abuse, but much of the human condition itself—the primal wound. The following is based on a typical workshop and provides a glimpse into the lived experience of the primal wound.

THE WOUNDED SPIRIT

At the beginning of the workshop, participants were asked to think of their own personal compulsions or addictions—behaviors or attitudes in which they found themselves involved against their will. Some thought of alcohol, drugs, sex, and food; others recalled obsessive relationships with lovers, spouses, or their children; still others focused on compulsivity in their personal and professional lives. People seemed to have no trouble finding at least one of their addictions, whether to substances, people, or behaviors. People could elect to share or not share their addiction.

They were then invited to imagine themselves in a situation during which they were beginning to feel the urge to engage in their addiction. They were encouraged to allow themselves to feel this urge as much as they possibly could, but then to imagine they choose *not* to perform the addictive behavior. Instead of acting out the addiction in the usual way, they simply sat with this pressing urge as it cried out for expression.

Vividly feeling that unpleasant moment, they slowly and carefully examined their experience of this urge that sought to drive them into the addiction. They were asked to plumb the depths of the feeling, to look deeply into the experience and attempt to get to the very bottom of it. What was in the experience that was so profoundly unpleasant that it demanded the addictive behavior? Sit with it. Explore it. Get to the absolute core of it.

The room was filled with silent tension as people struggled to see into this experience of their addictive urge, to peel back the layers of restlessness, agitation, and irritation, and allow the core to be revealed. Then we stepped to the chalkboard and asked the participants to share what they found. Here is the list they made:

Disintegration
Worthlessness
Lost
Disconnection
Lack of existence
Invisible
Bad
Evil
Void
Vacuum
Abandoned
Alone
Powerless
Wimpy
Wrong
Tense

Paranoid
Not breathing, nonbeing
Humiliated
Shame
Unloved

The above experiences were in effect so terrible that these people were being forced, automatically and unconsciously, to avoid them in their lives. These are the experiences that trigger their powerful addictive behaviors, behaviors they could not control even though the addictions in many cases involved considerable discomfort and pain, and in some cases, posed a threat to life.

But what exactly is it that makes each of these experiences so terrible? What is the power here that drives us to addiction?

In looking for the common denominator or underlying theme of all these experiences, one can sense some core experience involving the extinction of individual selfhood. For example, if I feel “shameful” and “guilty,” or “wimpy” and “powerless,” I am in a vulnerable position that might eventually lead to my destruction. Or if I am feeling “worthless, unloved, and wrong,” I feel like someone who can be eradicated. And of course, feeling “disintegration,” “lack of existence,” “invisibility,” or “nonbeing” even more directly implies that I am passing out of existence. Such experiences suggest a threat to my existence, a threat to my being. In short, all these experiences imply the threat of nonbeing.

Part of the tremendous power of addictions is that they offer ways of avoiding this threat of nonbeing. Addictions are not simply habits and tastes casually gathered over the course of living; they are desperate strategies by which we attempt to avoid the unimaginable terror of non-existence. This partially explains the perplexing tenacity of addictions even in the face of pain, illness, and physical death itself. Using three different random examples, we can diagram the relationship between nonbeing, these negative feelings, and addictions as shown in figure 1.1.

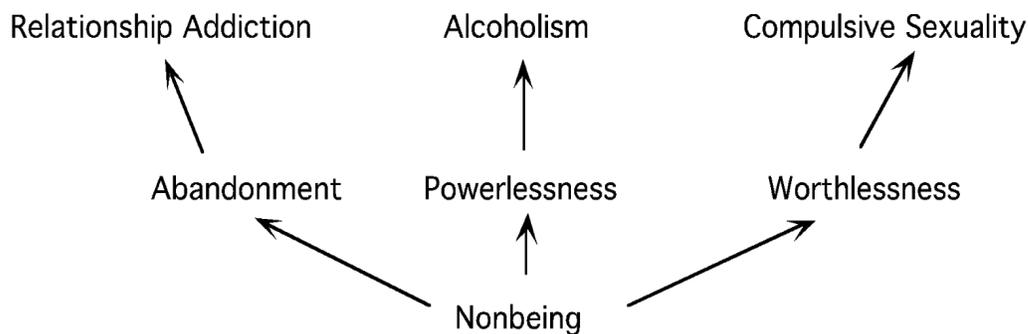


Figure 1.1

The arrows illustrate a movement away from the negative experiences conditioned by nonbeing—abandonment, powerlessness, and worthlessness—into the apparent safety and comfort of the addictive process. These negative experiences or qualities embody the threat of nonbeing, and form the immediate foundation or “basement” of the addiction. We shall see in a moment that there is also an “attic” to the addictive structure, that is, positive experiences that are incorporated into the addiction.

By nonbeing we do not mean physical death. Although nonbeing and death are often confused, people prove daily that physical death is nothing compared to the dread of nonbeing: the betrayed lover feels so devastated that she or he commits suicide or homicide rather than live with the experience of a wounded self; the battered spouse returns time and again to the life-threatening relationship rather than ending the relationship and feeling profoundly lost and alone; and alcohol and nicotine addicts ignore cirrhosis and cancer in pursuit of a habit that seems to offer some respite from underlying threatening experiences. All of these demonstrate a motivation beyond life and death. Given such empirical evidence then, we speak here of something more terrible than death itself—nonbeing.

Participants in the workshop began at the top of the above diagram and moved down towards the hidden root of negative experiences beneath their addictions. (This realm is what Roberto Assagioli termed the *lower unconscious*.) They found that addictions in effect seemed to offer some protection from the threat of personal annihilation. But this is only half of the picture. The addictive process involves not only this avoidance of nonbeing, but a quest for being as well.

THE ATTEMPTED REMEDY

After exploring the depths of nonbeing, the members of the group were asked to return to their imaginations and to that exact moment in which they first feel the urge to act out their addiction. This time, however, they were invited to imagine that they do not stop themselves, but that they instead freely engage in the addictive behavior.

As they fully experienced the addiction in fantasy, they were again asked to go to the core of the experience. What was the essential thing the addiction gave them? What was the positive experience they sought in their addiction, even though the addiction was destructive in many other ways? We again stepped to the chalkboard and asked the participants to share what they found. Here is their list:

I'm okay
Breath
Deep satisfaction
Completion
Allaying and release of anxiety
Peace
Approval, I'm okay
Security
Comfort
Being playful
Allowed to be my child
Self-discovery
A focus for my life
Meaning
Rebellion/power/anarchy
Self-directed
Surrender
Will
Spontaneity
Non-conformity
Illegality
Ritual
Normality
Acceptance by group
Feeling of being alive
Freedom
Acceptance of desire
Living in the flow of the moment
Identification with the group

Here they were discovering what might be called positive “kernels” or “nuclei” hidden within the addictive process. Such a positive nucleus is like a tiny glimmer of goodness buried in the destructiveness of the addiction. While engaging the addiction, these people reported feeling not the threat of nonbeing, but touches of acceptance, freedom, positive selfhood, and personal power. Even a feeling of oblivion or unconsciousness, which is experienced in many addictions, still holds the positive nuclei of peace or serenity—quite different from the gut-wrenching anxiety of facing true nonbeing.

Participants’ compulsive behaviors served not only to avoid the negative experiences conditioned by nonbeing, but promised positive experiences also. Rather than feeling bad about

themselves and life, empty and worthless, isolated and afraid, they could here feel good about themselves and about life, feel free and confident, feel connected to themselves and other people.

In short, rather than having a negative experience of self-and-world, of existence, of being, there is here a positive experience of self-and-world, of existence, of being. Participants discovered that their addictions were methods by which they attempted to climb out of a realm of negative experience into a realm of positive experience. Using our same three random examples above, we can add positive modes of being to the diagram.

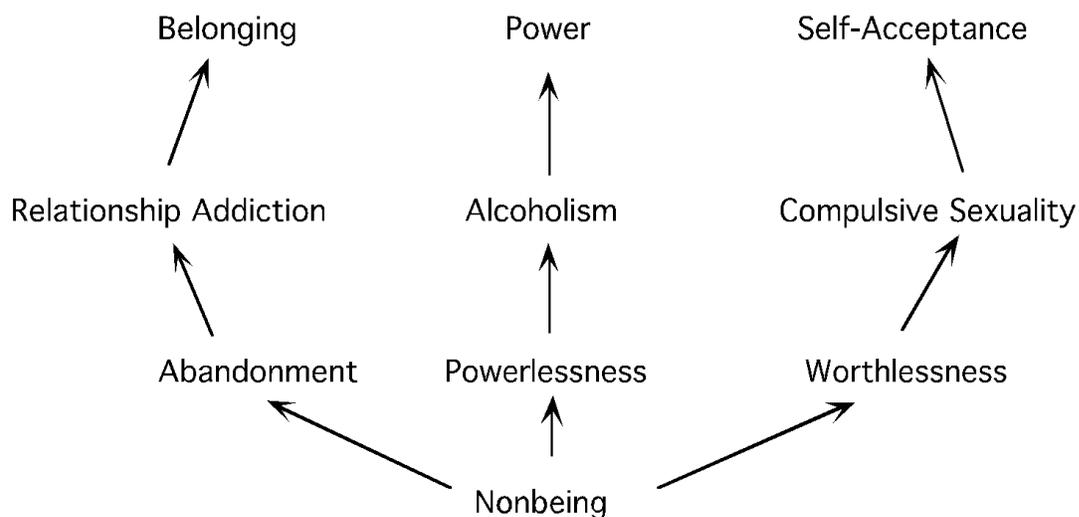


Figure 1.2

This diagram shown in figure 1.2 depicts some positive modes of being—belonging, power, and self-acceptance—as forming the positive nuclei of the three addictions shown. In order to escape the feeling of abandonment, for example, I might become addicted to a particular relationship that gives me an experience of belonging. And however destructive this relationship is to myself or the other person, I will still remain in its thrall, pushed by the threat of abandonment and enticed by the promise of belonging.

Addiction embodies a powerful and destructive vicious circle in which we continually cycle through negative and positive modes of being. In abusive relationships, we are seduced by moments of peace and love and then are plunged into despair by the next round of abuse. In substance abuse, we feel the joy and well-being of the intoxication, but then the remorse and self-loathing of the morning after. Here is the closed system, the vicious circle, of the addictive process. Our drawing is more complete if we add this cycling between negative and positive modes as shown in figure 1.3.

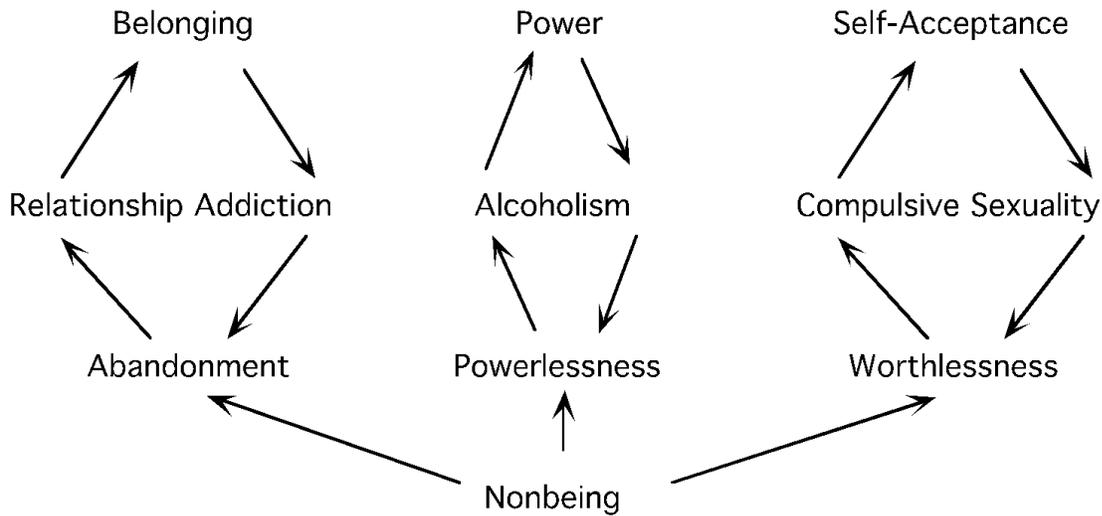


Figure 1.3

The addictive process then juxtaposes these two powerful forces of positive and negative modes of being. We are like the proverbial donkey, threatened by the stick of the negative mode while being enticed by the carrot of the positive mode. We are trapped in a powerful energy field created by opposing negative and positive poles. The strong interplay between these poles, between what the Buddhists call “aversion and craving,” pervades human existence.

We feel impotent and worthless beneath the desperate search for the right career, house, or stock portfolio that will give us some sense of power and self-worth. Or, feeling an undercurrent of meaninglessness and emptiness in our lives, we become addicted to sex and relationships, to children and family, or to fame and fortune, in order to feel fulfilled and purposeful. This dynamic also drives the formation of an entire *survival personality*, a presentable and even winning personality that hides the deeper experiences of isolation, low self-worth, and emptiness.

Virtually all dysfunctional human behavior seems conditioned to some extent by the threat of nonbeing and the resultant pushes and pulls of negative and positive modes of being. The twin dynamic between negative and positive modes of being drives our lives, while the still-deeper threat of nonbeing drives them both.

But now some final questions arise. Where does this threat of nonbeing come from in the first place? Is nonbeing intrinsic to the fabric of life, or does it represent a wound in that fabric? Is nonbeing a natural aspect of human existence, or is it the effect of some unnatural event?

The hypothesis here is that the threat of nonbeing is not intrinsic to human life, and that it indicates a primal wound to our sense of self caused by trauma. This position encourages one not

to accept fatalistically the threat of nonbeing as an essential characteristic of nature, but to search for the root causes of this primal wound. Let us rejoin the workshop as participants do precisely this.

NEGLECT AND ABUSE

After some discussion of the preceding exercise, it became time to address the issues of neglect and abuse and their traumatic effect on the human personality. We did not define neglect or abuse at this point in the workshop, but simply moved toward exploring the participants' own sense of these.

People were asked if they wished to explore their own personal experiences of neglect and abuse, again with the intention of plumbing the experience to its core. Those who wished to do this were asked to close their eyes and to think of a time when they felt neglected or abused. They were asked to relive the experience in their imaginations to the extent to which this felt comfortable. If at any time they felt too uncomfortable during the exercise, they were to stop, open their eyes, and make contact with us. These experiences were disturbing to explore, so participants were encouraged to respect their own sense of whether to proceed or not at every point during the process. Too, there were bonds of trust among the group members that supported this work.

After some time of experientially exploring what was for them the central experience of neglect or abuse, they were asked to open their eyes and again share what they had discovered. Here is their list:

I don't exist
Invaded (leading to dissociation and mistrust)
Overpowered
Impotent
You can't exist (leading to thoughts of rebellion, murder, suicide)
You can't exist, except as I say (causing withdrawal into fantasy)
I am worthless
Humiliation
Powerlessness
Betrayal (leading to rage)
Violation
Frustration, rage
Isolation
Denial of my existence
Trapped

Fearful
Loneliness
No one there to protect, to turn to
Feeling of being a bad person

During the discussion that followed, participants reported that while they were suffering neglect and abuse they did not feel like human beings. They did not in these moments experience themselves as feeling persons, but as mere objects with no freedom, dignity, or human identity. In Martin Buber's (1958) terms, they felt themselves not as "Thou's" but as "It's." They felt cut off from the life-giving communion of human relationship, and at the mercy of blind impersonal forces.

In moments of neglect, they felt unseen, unheard, and unacknowledged in their humanness. It was as if a lifeline had been cut, causing them to fall into a seemingly bottomless pit of isolation, loneliness, and worthlessness. And abuse added something more to this trauma of neglect: the active violation, betrayal, and destruction of humanness. In abuse we are not only treated as an object, but we are used in violent and humiliating ways.

The experiences listed above strongly resemble the experiences that participants had found earlier to trigger the addictive behaviors. But here is an even clearer focus on the primal wound of nonbeing: "I don't exist," "Denial of my existence," "You can't exist." Like the threatening experiences that triggered the addictions, the core experience of neglect and abuse tends towards nonbeing—the two lists are quite equivalent in this regard.

Thus it seems that this powerful threat of nonbeing, so central to self-destructive attachments, arises when we are treated as objects rather than as unique human persons. The wound of nonbeing is not like the accidental pain, fear, or injury we suffer in life; it is caused by the intentional or unintentional acts of those around us. The core experience of human being derives from our relationships in life, so it makes sense that the threat of nonbeing arises when these relationships are disturbed.

IN CONCLUSION

In looking at the entire psychological terrain covered in the workshop, we are left with this hypothetical pattern:

1. Neglect or abuse, causing wounding, which creates
2. The threat of nonbeing, leading to
3. The powerful twin dynamism between negative and positive modes of being.

We have only to add the central element of wounding in order to complete our diagram (figure 1.4).

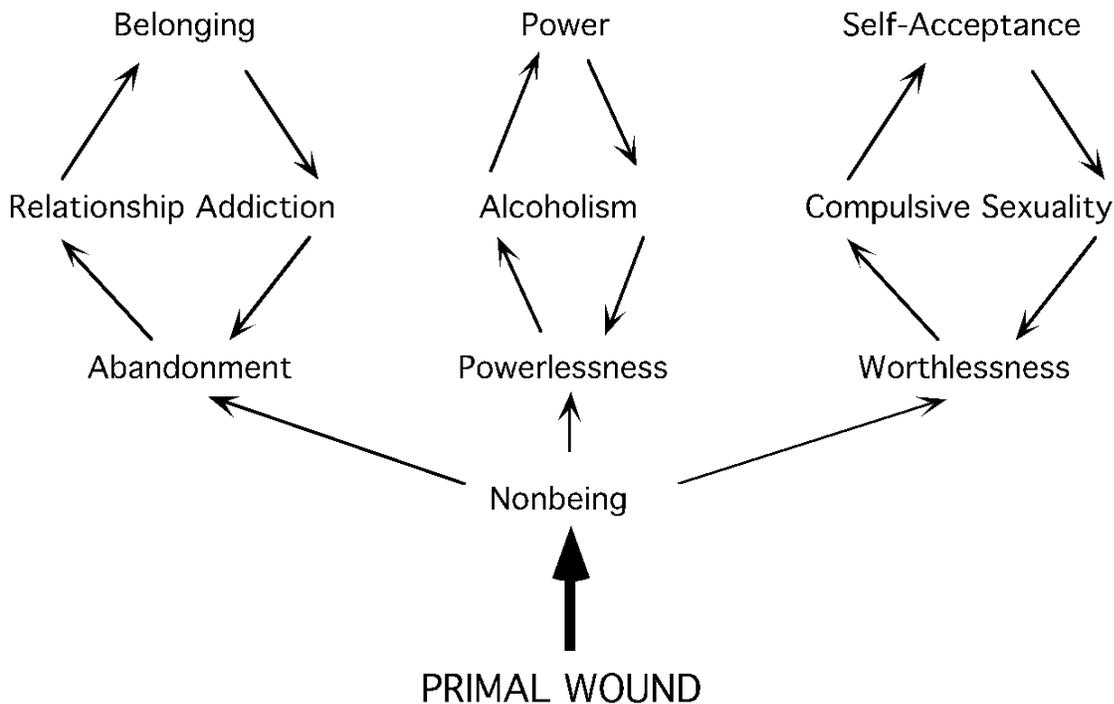


Figure 1.4

What emerged during this workshop are core dynamics operating in human psychological dysfunction. The experiences of the participants support the view that human life is crippled—invisibly but powerfully—by the wound of nonbeing caused by neglect and abuse. This primal wound forces our lives to become dominated by the desperate unconscious avoidance of nonbeing, and the equally desperate search for a sense of being untouched by this wounding. While the sources of the wound may be hidden and difficult to recognize, it may well be worth searching for these sources when dealing with self-destructive addictions, compulsions, or attachments in our lives.

It is only in the past couple of decades that this hidden realm of wounding is fully revealing itself. There is today a strong and growing recovery movement, an explosion of different programs designed to heal the effects of childhood abuse and neglect. This movement is a collective grappling with the varied effects of childhood wounding, from codependence and workaholicism to romance and sex addiction to alcohol and drug abuse. The list goes on and on, illuminating the many destructive ways we attempt to secure being in the face of nonbeing.

Indeed, the diagram above is quite similar to the “iceberg model” developed by a major thinker in the recovery movement, Charles Whitfield (1991). Whitfield’s model points to dysfunction in family and society as the root cause of human wounding, but this wounding is submerged deeply in the unconscious in the same way an iceberg is submerged in water. According to Whitfield, from this hidden trauma there develop such feelings as abandonment, shame, and emptiness, which finally break into expression in such things as chemical dependence, eating disorders, and relationship addictions. These latter manifestations are more visible, and are thus the tip of the “iceberg” whose larger mass is hidden from view and whose core is early wounding.

We have then a model of human wounding and defense that is rooted in a primal wound of nonbeing and the resulting compulsive drive for being. We have found this model quite useful in our practice of psychotherapy, and it seems to clarify many important aspects of human psychological problems.

Furthermore, the breadth of this point of view holds a possibility that many approaches to human health and healing can be seen addressing these same core issues of wounding, nonbeing, and being in different ways. In short, the nonbeing-being dynamic, focused as it is upon the core experience of human selfhood, can become one of the lynchpins connecting many otherwise dissimilar approaches to human healing and growth.

REFERENCES

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