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INTRODUCTION

This is a book about addiction and how to overcome it. But addiction, as you will see throughout this book, is hardly confined to drug addicts, alcoholics, or compulsive gamblers. It is deeply embedded in the behavior of nearly everyone who lives in the modern world. Addictions are like parasites that sneak into the most powerful circuits in the brain – those that govern our basic survival instincts – and, by hijacking those circuits and manipulating their core biochemistry, profoundly influence, and even dictate, our thoughts and behavior.

Many people think addiction means being unable to resist something that provides overwhelming pleasure. But in this book we will suggest almost exactly the opposite: being addicted means being unconsciously attached to, unconsciously driven towards, pain and distress. In our view, the simplest types of addictions are the “neuroses,” in which people become stuck in loops of negative emotion like obsessive anxiety or worry. The reason, we suggest, that so-called “neurotic” people become stuck in loops of negative emotion is that they are literally *addicted* to those emotions. The reason so many of us find it so difficult to change self-destructive and self-defeating patterns is that these patterns are *addictions*. The brain receives a similar, although typically less intense, biochemical reward from worrying as it does from drugs like cocaine or methamphetamine, and the habit is similarly difficult to break.

Like all addictions, an “emotional” addiction to worry or anxiety is driven primarily by the stress, or “fight-or-flight,” response. Any heightened emotional state or experience of stress will activate such a response and trigger the release of stress hormones. Researchers have found that stress hormones such as cortisol have effects in the brain that are almost identical to the effects of addictive drugs like cocaine. And since stress triggers the release of hormones that have very similar effects to addictive drugs, it follows that anything we perceive as being stressful, including anything that creates emotional pain, can potentially become addictive.

CHAPTER 2

FOOD, SEX, AND CRAVING

While it may be a challenge to see how anxiety or worry could possibly be rewarding, everyone knows that eating and having sex can make us feel very good. And there's really no reason why eating and sex shouldn't be completely pleasurable, why they can't be almost entirely free of conflict, guilt, or regret. But primarily because of the highly unnatural conditions that surround food and sex in modern life, many people relate to them in ways that are out of balance and, in our terminology, clearly addictive.

Pornography, for example, is something we are simply not well-equipped biologically to deal with. Nothing in our evolutionary heritage prepares us for the barrage and potpourri of highly stimulating images, often specifically catered to our own unique tastes and desires, that pornography presents us with. Hence it's very easy for pornography to throw some people out of balance – to lead them to spend hours watching it, at the expense of the rest of their lives, and then to either regret that lost time, or feel shame about it, or have it drive them into poor decisions with real-life sexual partners.

Addiction operates in two main ways. It derives biochemical payoffs simply by creating or perpetuating inherently unpleasant, distressing states, such as anxiety, and generating dysfunctional payoffs directly from those states. It also, however, takes activities or behaviors that are inherently *pleasant*, that could otherwise be almost entirely pleasurable, and *contaminates* them by introducing unnecessary pain, distress, and states of survival mode. This latter dynamic is what happens in any food or sex addiction.

The key step in food and sex addiction is compulsive craving or desire. Various studies have shown that the feeling of craving – just the *thought* of craving something or someone – triggers, just like an addictive drug, the release of both dopamine and beta-endorphin in the brain. So the feeling of craving can potentially be *used*, although

CHAPTER 12

Triggers and “Neural Antibodies”

Perhaps the most important part of beating addiction is identifying and recognizing the triggers that send you hurtling into your addictive patterns. It can be little things. Maybe when you're meeting someone and they're late, it triggers you into feeling “less than,” or into becoming extremely angry. It's easy to justify feeling that way – it's their fault for being late! – but ultimately feeling “less than” and unreasonably angry only hurts *you*. If someone else is late, it isn't a reflection of your own worth. The initial hint of anger may give you an indication of what decisions might be best for you in the future – perhaps you won't choose to meet that person again under those circumstances, or perhaps under any circumstance at all. But engaging in that feeling of anger for more than a few moments doesn't make any sense, because it's only hurting *you*. If you want to feel less pain and distress and live more fully, you'll have to learn to beat triggers like that.

You can think of the process that leads to the full-blown triggering of an addictive pattern as a series of dominoes. The first domino that falls is the trigger. If nothing interferes, the momentum of that first domino will eventually activate the entire addictive sequence, with a big, juicy drug payoff at the end. If your friend is late, you may, for example, start to think of several occasions where you felt painfully “less than.” Yes, in fact this very friend who is late has often made you feel “less than!” Because that's how she looks at you. She looks down at you, she laughs at you behind your back, she doesn't care about you. Those thoughts, whether or not they're based in reality, are the sound of the dominoes falling.

Even once you've mastered your addiction, it can be very difficult to keep that first domino from toppling over. The trick is to keep the first domino from crashing into the next domino in the sequence, which would then initiate the whole violent, painful, self-
