



Fresh French Fries

Just the thought alone is enough to trigger a plan on how to get some of those hot, not quite sure how they make it, delicious and salty snack. Your mouth starts to water and you realize it's been a while since you ate anything. You're on your way to the promise of the arches. We all know how unhealthy this is, but still, the siren calls and we bud duh duh duh duh, are lovin' it. If you were born after 1970, these golden beauties have been a part of your life for the entirety. Remember when you first had them and how that felt? You decided at some point either initially or after going many times; "I like fries!" so your brain will steer you in the direction of getting fries when a craving hits.

Regardless of if we are talking about French fries, phone use, sex, or drugs; addictions happen following the same chemical chain and commonality. Your brain decided it *really* likes it. Rather, it *Needs*. This has become just as important for overall functioning as air, water, food and daily hygiene as far as your brain is concerned. You become just as driven to supply the need.

So how does your brain become convinced that something is just as important as air? Conditioning and Context. Think back to your Intro to Psych class and remember the story of Pavlov and his dogs. Ring the bell, reward with food (context); Repeat (conditioning). Consequently, the dog's brain said "hey, bell rings I get food" – so they started salivating with the bell ring.

Let me introduce your limbic system, commonly called your emotional brain. This addition to your chemical composition causes the reward centers of your brain to light up with pleasure. Think of all the things you enjoy, and probably 50% of you are thinking about You Know Where since the start of this; that's your limbic system at work. Repeated exposure to whatever it was causes a series of reinforcement to your motivation/reward system, and it doesn't matter what it is, the "I like this" button has been pushed. You have a new bell. I'd like to tell you that this little system is only activated when something "feel good" happens, but unfortunately this has a wide cast net with hands in every feeling, thought and memory you possess. Every bit of information from the senses goes through this part for cataloging, both positive and negative. This part of your brain determines how you handle things that come up in your life.

So, theoretically let's say, repeated exposure to something (activity or otherwise) has lit up your pleasure centers. You feel good doing this. Currently, your present situation is stressful, maybe there are family pressures going, you're in your finals at college, or work is stressing you out. Something is hitting your limbic system, and it doesn't like it. At this point, your emotional brain takes over and says let's try that makes us feel good.



This is the start of addiction; it can be innocuous like French fries or your cell phone, or it can be detrimental and sudden like opiates or alcohol. Something is going on and the associations that make up who you are, is utilizing coping skills, aka the tips and tricks you learned along the way to deal with life and stress. However, in this day and age of constant stress and deadlines, at what point do we exhaust our ability to deal using only what we have acquired along the way? At that tipping point, when our stress exceeds our ability to cope, we reach for the things we've associated *really* liking. You might reach for your phone at this point, or your favorite, binge worthy Netflix original (or both!), a glass of wine or one of the little tablets left over from your dentist. Whatever you know makes you feel good and distracts you from whatever stressor you have going on. What calls your pleasure center will be different from someone else's.

So, if an addiction can form from anything and at any time, why are only some of them so stigmatized? Mostly due to the association of the word. When you hear the term "addiction" it conjures up images. If Regan was your president you would associate it more with marijuana, or if you were raised during the DARE era, your brain probably produced an image of someone with red, bloodshot eyes in dark alleyways or an egg in a frying pan. The younger crowd probably associates it with drinking and vaping, as other forms of what used to be considered 'illegal' or 'illicit' are now mainstream and legal. Associations are different from generation to generation. Which makes calling out addictions in their most deadly forms a very serious issue as the information must make sense, and remain continuous. Look how long it took to get the word out that smoking was bad for you and it no longer came doctor recommended. If information doesn't make sense, we have an all new generation of users due to the glamorized nature of drug and alcohol use. Again, if you were raised in the DARE era, you know what I'm talking about.

We all have the potential to develop an addiction, but just as the potential for is there, the potential to beat an addiction is there as well. Understanding and change take time and history shows us it's possible by increasing our understanding not only of addiction itself, but how it affects all of us who love French fries or anything else that pushes our pleasure button.