What’s the difference between an addiction and a compulsion? [1]

Dear Alice,

What is the difference between a compulsion and an addiction?

Answer

Dear Reader,

The distinction between a compulsion and an addiction is a fine one because the terms are sometimes misused and the medical profession’s conception of each changes as new research becomes available. Addiction and compulsion each have biologic/genetic and psychological components and each involves a perceived lack of control by the individual facing them. However, there are some key differences to keep in mind when using these terms.

A compulsion is a repetitive, ritualistic behavior that a person performs without rational motivation. Compulsive actions and behaviors offer temporary relief from anxiety in turn, the need to reduce this anxiety is what drives the compulsive behavior. Sometimes this anxiety takes the form of obsessive thoughts related to the compulsive behavior (i.e., fear of germs and hand-washing), but often the compulsive behavior has no clear relation to anything in particular (the need to walk all the way around one’s car clockwise before getting in).

Addictions, similar to compulsions, can offer relief from stress or anxiety, but are characterized primarily by an inability to discontinue a harmful behavior despite its negative consequences. Common addictions include unhealthy and repeated (over)use of alcohol, drugs, gambling, or smoking, for example. Addictions are easily formed to behaviors that provide physical or psychological pleasure or relief from pain.

Many people exhibit habitual behavior, but compulsions and addictions refer to those instances where these behaviors disrupt an individual’s ability to function. In fact, compulsions and addictions can be debilitating or become destructive if untreated, for the individual and/or her/his family, friends, and others. Individuals dealing with compulsion or addiction need to seek evaluation from a medical or mental health professional who can recommend behavioral therapy, medication, and/or group-run recovery programs to help restore a sense of control over their behavior.

Alice!

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- Mental Health Service (CUMC)

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