

Why “It Was the Addiction, Not You” Feels Good, and Still Isn’t True

“Separate the person from the addiction.”

It’s the simplest path forward.

It’s the softest landing.

It’s the story that hurts the least.

But is it true?

In active addiction, we all do things we’re not proud of. It turns our stomachs to relive the worst moments in our minds or utter the words out loud than turn those memories into living stories for others.

But pause on that phrase for a second: *in addiction*.

Unless someone is in a truly severe case, not every waking moment is spent under the influence. There are hours. Sometimes days. There are gaps. There is space. There is still life happening between uses.

Yet years later, people will describe their behavior like this:

“In the insanity of my addiction.”

“In the throes of addiction.”

“Because of my addiction.”

Everything harmful gets placed inside that container called addiction. All of it gets labeled as something *other* than the person.

But what about the good?

Was that not also done during addiction?

Is there something uniquely broken about the addicted brain that only produces bad behavior? Or does it simply make bad behavior easier, more automatic, more seductive? And if it is only influence, how do we explain the goodness that still shows up in people who are using, relapsing, or stuck in cycles?

We don’t ask these questions because the answer would make us uncomfortable.

Family members and addicted people alike are taught one simple idea:

“That was not you. That was your addiction. You are separate from it. You have to separate him from his addiction.”

I personally never liked this shit. The first time I heard it my left eyebrow raised in suspicion. Because when I acknowledge my truth, the whole story collapses.

The Part We Pretend Not to See

Did I lie in service of my addiction?

Yes. Often.

Did I know that I was needed somewhere more important than at my dealer's house?

Yes.

Did I *choose* pills instead of my family?

Yes.

Did cravings influence that decision?

Also, yes.

But *influence* is not the same as absence of choice.

Did I know right from wrong?

Yes.

Did I feel guilty?

Yes. Very.

Did I still do it?

Yes.

We know substances affect the prefrontal cortex. We know impulse control weakens. We know decision-making becomes distorted. All of that is real.

So then why did I feel guilty?

Why did I know I was fucking up?

Something in me still understood the line...and I crossed it anyway.

So, what do we do with that??

And what about people with process addictions? Gambling. Sex. Compulsion. No chemical altering the brain. Do they get the same pass? Or do we only absolve when there is a substance to point at?

The Gray We Refuse to Sit In

This whole thing is more complex than saying:

They were fully aware and evil

or

they were not in control and are blameless.

But we love binary, don't we?

We love being able to check one box or the other. It's this or it's that.

We love to decide quickly and move on.

Real life doesn't work like that.

Addiction can impair reasoning without erasing it.

It can influence choices without removing them.

It can make harmful behavior easier, without making it inevitable.

Both things can be true at the same time.

We reject this because it asks too much of us. It requires nuance. It requires emotional maturity. It requires sitting in discomfort instead of resolving it with a slogan given by a cheery addiction counselor.

Why “separating the person from the addiction” works, and why it still fails

This framework didn’t appear out of nowhere. It survives because, in many ways, **it works**. It solves real emotional problems. It reduces suffering in the short term. It creates momentum where despair once lived. It gives hope to the despondent.

But it also extracts a cost...and that cost is rarely named.

So instead of pretending this is good or bad, true or false, let’s sit with what it *actually* does.

What This Story Gives Us

- **It reduces shame.**

This is not small. It may be the greatest pro of them all. Shame can be corrosive for some. It paralyzes people. When someone believes they *are* their worst actions, many will not even try to change. “It wasn’t you” gives people room to breathe again. It creates enough emotional safety for some to take their first honest step forward.

- **It allows people to forgive themselves, and helps others forgive them.**

It creates a bridge between what someone did and who they can become. For families drowning in pain, it offers something that feels like oxygen: the ability to look ahead without being crushed by the past.

- **It provides an easy explanation for harmful behavior.**

Not a complete one by any means, but a *functional* one. It gives language to the confusion and endless questions spouses and partners have...It lets people say, “*This was not them at all, it was something wholly in control of them.*”

- **It makes harm feel less personal.**

And to be fair, it rarely is a personal attack. For loved ones, this can be the difference between staying stuck in resentment, anger, and rage or being able to see the person again. It helps them believe they were not targeted, that the pain wasn’t about their worth (although in some ways it is how they feel, and we do a poor job of acknowledging that).

- **Reunification becomes more likely.**

Families are more willing to try again when the harm is framed as external. This idea keeps doors open that might otherwise be closed forever.

- **It makes recovery feel possible.**

Simple narratives invite participation. When change feels less insurmountable, people are more willing to attempt it. “Oh shit...it’s not THAT bad then? Maybe I’ll give this thing a shot.”

- **It humanizes people in the eyes of society.**

Redemption becomes socially acceptable. People are not treated like villains forever. They are seen as someone who was under a spell, who woke up, and who deserves a second chance.

- **It can be a good starting point - if it is not the ending.**

I’m big on the last part of this one.

For some, this story is the doorway. It softens the nervous system enough to begin deeper work. Years later, after consistent behavior change, loved ones may forgive things they never could have forgiven on day one.

All of this matters. None of this is fake. These are real benefits.

But here is what this same story quietly takes.

What This Story Costs Us

- **It turns addiction into a mysterious force instead of a human pattern.**

When we make addiction feel paranormal or mystical - something no one can understand - it creates a kind of information power. Those inside it become the “experts,” and those harmed are left doubting their own reality. It’s a sort of sneaky arbitrage with information, truth, and emotions.

- **It offers an easy psychological escape.**

If harm can always be externalized, there is little incentive to examine the parts of the self that made those choices possible. Growth may stall where honesty should begin. Many people sober up and never change because of this statement and ones like it.

- **It dulls empathy for the people who were hurt.**

The focus quietly shifts to the recovery journey, not the wreckage left behind. Pain and shame become something to move past without too much thought, not something to metabolize.

- **It can trap partners in relationships under false pretenses.**

When someone believes the behavior was not truly “them,” they may stay in situations that are unsafe - hoping for a version of the person that does not yet exist or may never exist.

- **It oversimplifies what real change requires.**

Sobriety becomes the finish line for many, instead of the starting point. Sobriety is simply the ticket to enter the big show of behavioral change, but it doesn’t appear that way when we oversimplify it. The deeper psychological, relational, and moral work gets bypassed.

- **It removes agency while pretending recovery is not a choice.**

This is the contradiction at the center that really gets to me.

If addiction erases choice, then recovery cannot be chosen either.

And yet, people choose it every day.

Addiction is a process bookended by choices. I do concede it does not feel like one in the muddy middle, and it is complicated, but recovery *is* a choice.

- **It silences unresolved pain.**

Loved ones feel something is unfinished, but they are told it should not be discussed. They have no way to convey the real emotional pain they are experiencing because treatment centers and counselors alike do not hold space for their feelings. "You can't bring up the past" is often used by people that have wholly accepted that they are separate from their addiction. The past becomes off limits and the chance of truly connecting intimately dies with it.

- **It can keep people in harm's way.**

Especially for vulnerable women and children. Especially in relationships where abuse is being reframed as illness. Safety gets sacrificed for the idea of redemption.

So Which One Wins?

I don't know. Honestly. I guess it's a matter of preference? Hell...It's not for me to decide policy or make decisions for everyone anyway. But I do have some thoughts:

I only know that *truth matters*. It matters to me more than anything.

There has to be a way to honor the compassion of this model without lying to ourselves or the people who were hurt. Right?

There has to be a way to hold agency and empathy at the same time.

Because when we pretend the addicted person is the most important one in the room, we lose something sacred.

And too many people are paying that price in silence.

Let's acknowledge a few things - regardless of if you agree or disagree with my take on any of this. I think this is common sense:

1. There is still a lot of science we do not fully understand.

We still cannot map exactly how addiction affects each individual brain. Yes, it changes learning and reward systems. But people also habituate. They make small harmful choices repeatedly without consequence. Over time, the brain learns: *this is fine*. Not because it is, but because it has not been punished yet - there are no consequences and so we internally habituate our lies and poor behavior.

So is it the addiction driving the behavior?

Or is it a learned pattern reinforced by rationalization and lack of consequence?

We do not know.

But we pretend we do.

2. The fundamental attribution error is at play here.

We judge ourselves by our circumstances.

We judge others by their character.

If you cut to the front of the line, you are an asshole.

If I cut to the front of the line, I had a good reason.

Addiction magnifies this bias.

And when we are told, “*It wasn’t you*,” it becomes effortless to excuse harm.

We move from *I hurt someone* to *something happened to me*.

3. Shame relief and the hunger for reunification.

We want families back together. We want closure. We want relief. So we simplify the story to reduce pain, even if it distorts the truth.

We placate the emotional need to believe something less painful than:

This person harmed me and knew it.

Is that wrong? Maybe not.

But it is incomplete.

The Inside Secret

Sometimes it feels like an unspoken agreement in recovery spaces.

We know what we did.

We knew it was wrong.

But the only way to live with ourselves is to pretend we had no choice.

So we externalize.

We mythologize.

We turn addiction into a demon, a disease, a possession by a nefarious force from below.

But my greatest growth came from doing the opposite.

Am I everyone? No, of course not. But I don’t think I’m vastly different from anyone else either.

I accepted the monster I was, knowingly.

I acknowledged the selfishness.

The manipulation.

The darkness.

And instead of running from it, I repaired it. I stared it straight in the face.

I accepted and forgave myself in spite of it.

I changed because I told the truth, not because I hid behind a story.

I did not "pee on my wife's leg and tell her it was raining."

She knew. Come on...of course she knew.

She's not dumb. She felt like she was being treated that way though when she heard the masses giving the message discussed here.

And I respected her enough not to gaslight or lie to her, even when the industry would have supported me.

My Truth

I accepted everything I did as a function of **me**.

Not my addiction.

Substances made bad decisions easier.

They did not make them right. They did not make me innocent.

I knew.

I chose.

I failed.

I fucked up.

Here's how I approached it, written as if I were talking to my wife:

"I acted out of character only in part because I was addicted. I need you to know this.

I knew I wasn't living right.

I feel horrible about every bit of it.

It makes making bad decisions easier, but I always knew they were bad.

I disregarded my responsibility to you, our family, and myself. I will spend every waking moment of the rest of my life in honor of you and repairing the broken parts of myself that made all of this possible.

I am committed to abstinence - because substances did play a role - but moreso I am committed to behavioral change and growth.

I want the next chapter of our lives to look like the one I always promised you - and I know this is an insane ask, but if you'll give me a chance, I won't let you down.

If you don't, I respect that too.

It will not affect the vigor and tenacity at which I move forward with the work before me.

In forgiving me, you will also be forgiving the awful things I knowingly did - the bad decisions were me.

I only have myself to blame.

I regret every bit of it...and I am a dumbass.

You will be burdened with the pain of that truth for the rest of your life, and I will sit with you through every bit of it and be by your side while you process it - at the level you will allow me physically, but always in spirit and thought.

If we're going to move forward, it will be while knowing all of these things, and deciding to walk forward anyway.

It won't be because you accepted something I know is not true."

That's how I approached it, and I think it's right.

I also acknowledge it's really risky for some people - especially serial cheaters - because it could spell the end of their family unit.

You're volunteering information that you know could be the end of your family unit as you know it.

But I think it's right nonetheless.

I don't like how we treat family members as stupid.

Why don't we sit with them through their pain and acknowledge it the same way we do for the addicted person? Why the insistence on pretending none of this was real?

I also think this is the part where recovery can't be contingent - that is, it can't be reliant on anyone else or getting anything back.

No matter what Paige decided to do, I was going to fix me...and to be real, I was going to become so amazing that she would have had to have been crazy not to give me a shot.

If she said 'no thanks' I was going to live in a way that she would have regretted that decision.

Maybe that's messed up...I don't know. But that's how committed I was.

How do we model this and scale it and make it part of recovery in general?

I don't know...but I don't think it would be *that* hard. I think it's mostly common sense.

Get fucking better. Do fucking better. Repair. Acknowledge. Repair some more. Own. Move forward.

I disregarded my responsibility to my wife, our family, and myself.

I regret every bit of it.

I own it.

I will spend my life repairing what I broke and becoming someone worthy of the trust I destroyed.

It's not easy, but it is simple.

It's just uncomfortable.

And maybe that is the cost of telling the truth.

A lot of people in addiction behave selfishly and lack empathy.

That is not a moral judgment. It is an observation.

It is also not rare. It is common.

And pretending otherwise does not help anyone.

I do not have a lot of patience for the insistence of toxic empathy - especially from people that have never lived it or lived in it.

It's a strange form of luxury belief that sounds great out loud, but disproportionately affects the people that deal with these situations on a daily basis.

I think the real antidote to this is humility.

Not performative shame.

Not self-flagellation.

It's in humility that comes from finally seeing the impact of your life's choices on other people and letting that reality change you.

Sometimes that hurts. Sometimes it has to.

Growth without discomfort is just a nicer story about staying the same - because growth is always uncomfortable.

And when we spin this narrative for families and loved ones, we are quietly making the addicted person the most important one in the room.

Their pain, their healing, their redemption becomes the center of gravity.

And I do not understand how that happened.

Because there is a non-insignificant number of families who would actually heal if the addicted person were not part of their day-to-day lives.

There are people who would be safer.

Children who would have more stability.

Partners who would finally breathe.

That is not cruel. It is reality.

It hurts me just as much as you to read it.

I believe in empathy.

I believe in compassion.

I believe in forgiveness and grace.

I also believe there is a point where empathy stops being loving and starts being dangerous - when it asks people (partners and spouses) with a real chance at wholeness to keep sacrificing themselves for someone who may never change.

That tradeoff deserves to be named...and I think that's a bit of what is going on here.