



THE ITCH AT THE CORE OF ADD

[ADD, Addiction & Creativity]

Delivered from Distraction

(*excerpts from Chapter 07*)

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[Some people] have this prickly kind of ADD, a kind that generates an all-but-unscratchable lifelong itch, an itch that can lead to enormous success and productivity or acute embarrassment, even utter disaster. [They may] always feel a vague dissatisfaction, as if [they're] not doing something right, or [they're] missing some important ingredient that other people have that makes them feel happy.

[They have a] certain type of ADD that makes [them] always feel slightly out of kilter, slightly dissatisfied, slightly unhappy. And sometimes *very* unhappy – but for reasons [they] can't comprehend. There is no comprehensible, external reason. [Their] sadness derives from [their] internal wiring. What [they] suffer from is not depression. Depression comes on for an extended period. [They] can be attacked by sadness for a day or a week or an hour – and it can clear up in as short a time as well. That is not depression. [It is] this certain type of ADD in which high stimulation becomes a biological necessity to feel fully engaged and alive.

People who have ADD often don't like how they feel inside. It is difficult to explain exactly what they don't like about how they feel, except to say that they feel bored, or 'off', or logy, or at sea. **What can begin as a mildly unpleasant feeling can escalate in seconds into a veritable crisis. They feel they *must* do something to change how they feel. Within moments, they are operating on a level beyond their rational control.**

It is in these moments that they can make impulsive, self-destructive decisions. They start an argument or a fight. They blow up in anger. They create a crisis out of nothing. They down a half a bottle of vodka, or make a wild investment on the stock exchange, or jump into bed with someone they would have done better to avoid.

What they don't understand – and the wide world certainly doesn't understand – is that these reckless acts do stem from a biological need to alter their inner state. In pain, they feel compelled to seek relief immediately. It helps if they can develop a repertoire of adaptive, health ways to change their inner state.

[These people] have an itch they can't ever quite scratch. Their attempts to scratch may lead them to become workaholics, or to take extreme risks, or to scratch the itch with drugs, alcohol, food, sex or gambling. There are good ways to scratch and bad.

Traditionally, people look at this problem through the lens of morality. People who do the various things named above usually receive a judgment, not a diagnosis. At best, people say they don't have their priorities straight. At worse, they are condemned.

But I want to invite you now to look at what's going on through the lens of brain science, not the lens of morality. Could it be that all these people share a problem of peculiar brain chemistry? Specifically, could it be, based on an inherited pattern of neurotransmitters, receptors, and carrier molecules, that they are not as able as other people to find pleasure in the ordinary ways most people can? Could it be, based on this genetic variant, that they must resort to extraordinary means to feel fully alive?

About a decade ago Kenneth Blum and other researchers suggested the existence of a condition they named the reward deficiency syndrome, or RDS. People who have RDS are not able to feel pleasure as easily as others. The gene involved in their model (and there are many other genes proposed now) is the A1 allele of the dopamine D2 receptor. People who have this variant are not as able as those who don't have it to reap the pleasurable benefits of dopamine.

Dopamine is one of the chief chemical mediators of pleasure. Anything that gives you a squirt of dopamine tends to make you feel good. Exercise can do this. So can making love. So can any kind of creative activity in which your imagination gets deeply involved. So can drinking, gambling, taking extreme risks, eating ice cream and other carbohydrates, taking various drugs, and smoking cigarettes. In other words, as I said before, there are good ways and bad ways to get your squirt of dopamine.

People who have RDS are more apt to turn to both the good and the bad ways excessively, because moderate ways don't produce as much pleasure as they do for other people. A good-morning kiss and a hug on their way out the door don't do as much for them as they do for others. They have to do more to get the squirt of dopamine than other people do. So they do more. ...all because they need to do more in order to feel as good as others do with less. ... In other words, people vary in their ability to feel pleasure given a certain stimulus. ... And how you find pleasure in life is one of the key determinants of health and success.

If you have a certain kind of genetic makeup you may be predisposed to developing an addiction, or a near-addiction, not because you are a bad person but because your wiring doesn't afford you the more ordinary ways of getting pleasure that other people's wiring does. This genetic variant often shows up in people who have ADD. That's one reason why addictions are so common in people who have ADD. But it also shows up frequently in highly creative people in all fields.

There is an interesting link between near-addictions and creativity....

When you can't find pleasure as easily as others do, that causes an "itch" inside you. You want to find satisfaction, but you can't. So you resort to extraordinary means. Some are adaptive and helpful; others are maladaptive and hurtful.

If you are also creative by nature, you live with another kind of itch. You are always inventing new expressions of that creativity; new plots for books... new melodies... new recipes... new routines... new images... and on and on... When the first nubbin of the new idea breaks into your consciousness it causes excitement, but also a strange kind of pain. [I believe this pain is the realization or expectation that your incredible new will be like all the past ideas that have failed or been left incomplete.] It demands attention as it view with your other ideas to be developed to the fullest and expressed [but you also suspect you should just give it up now before it becomes another disappointment or catastrophe.]