

## EXCITEMENT AND THE ADDICTIVE PROCESS

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Let's face it. Most of us are hooked on the pursuit of excitement! It seems that whatever direction you turn to these days people are obsessed with it. Music is getting louder, the beat stronger and action sequences in movies more frequent and faster. Go to church and you will probably also be bombarded with more stimulating excitement than you've had all week!

Just this past week my wife and I spoke at a pastor's conference and were sitting with a couple of youth pastors from different churches. Their sole conversation was about how they had recently taken their young peoples groups to Magic Mountain where the hit is "Goliath", the new and death defying roller coaster ride. I asked them why they thought their young people enjoyed the experience so much and they replied, without batting an eyelid, that it was the greatest "adrenaline rush" they had ever experienced! I can believe them. When any experience fools your mind into believing that it is about to be destroyed, your adrenaline screams out at you – and gives you the greatest pleasure of your life. One pastor said that it made his contact lenses "pop out"!

What bothers me is that thrills like this are not confined to amusement parks. We seem to all be on some phenomenal roller coaster ride through life. We use excitement to give us pleasure. We have come to depend on the perpetual flow of adrenaline to make life interesting. When there is no excitement we feel down and bored.

The experience of pleasure is one of the fundamental gifts God has given us. It is so important that God created a center in the brain, called the "locus acumbans" or pleasure center, that is dedicated to it. A lack of ability to experience pleasure is considered pathological – we call it "anhedonia" and see it, for example, in the depressive disorders. Ultimately, I believe, this pleasure center helps us to "enjoy" God. Today, however, we abuse this pleasure center by becoming too dependent on excitement to stimulate this pleasure center and this inevitably leads us to become addicted to such pleasure. I call this "adrenaline addiction" and have written about it in several of my books because I really am concerned that Christians can just as easily become addicted as anyone.

How far, then, should we go in our quest for excitement as the basis for pleasure? I think we have gone too far already. Slowly we are losing our capacity to experience the pleasure of "little"

things. Sunsets don't do it for us anymore, neither do quiet moments of worship. We need "Goliaths" of all sorts to give us pleasure.

### **Too much excitement has its price**

Why should we be concerned about the modern-day pursuit of excitement? For the simple reason that our brain's pleasure center is becoming more and more "flooded". This flooding raises the threshold of excitement that must be exceeded the next time we experience pleasure. So the more we ride our Goliaths, the greater must be the next thrill before we can find any pleasure. This is the phenomenon that underlies all addictions.

The most potent of the illegal addicting drugs operates on the same pleasure center as thrill seeking behavior. That's why cocaine is so addicting – it stimulates the pleasure/excitement centers of the brain par excellence. But drugs are not the only triggers of the pleasure center. Many **hidden** addictions do the same. The compulsive shopper, the engrossed scientist, the cliff climber, the long distance jogger, the sexual voyeur and the power-wielding boss all have one thing in common: their quest for stimulating excitement can become forms of hidden addiction. Our marvelous brain, given by God so that we can experience the simple pleasures of life, is slowly being conditioned to only accept ever increasing levels of excitement – a classic addiction bind.

Obviously, this doesn't mean there is no place for pleasure in our lives. Of course there is. But we were not designed for constant, exciting stimulation. Our pleasure center needs time to rest otherwise the small things of life – watching a sunset, holding a baby, a walk in the countryside, or a moment of quiet meditation - can no longer provide satisfying pleasure.

### **Avoiding the pitfalls of excitement**

How, then, can we avoid excitement's pitfalls, and how can we break the addiction process that our search for stimulation maintains? Here are some suggestions:

1. ***Begin by reordering your spiritual values and beliefs about the root of pleasure.***

Proverbs 21:17 tells us that *"he that loveth pleasure shall be a poor man."* Jesus also warned us that the *"riches and pleasure of this life"* are thorns that choke the Word (Luke 8:14). These are not idle warnings. They come to us from the God who created us for His own pleasure and therefore knows us better than we will ever know ourselves. He is to be the greatest source of our pleasure, not activities, even if they are church based!

2. ***Accept that a "deficit in excitement" is necessary for healthy functioning.*** Believe it or not, boredom is actually good for us. It helps to provide the time our mind and body needs for

rejuvenation. Work and play, excitement and relaxation, euphoria and tranquility - these are points and counterpoints of a healthy life. They are like valleys and hills - the one is necessary for the other to be seen.

3. ***Watch where you get your excitement.*** Don't avoid pleasure. Pleasure and stimulation have their place. But beware persistent thrill seeking, sex, pornography - the list of the harmful sources of stimulation is long. We have to guard against our deeper needs - low self-esteem, a search for love or respect, or a need to be powerful - from driving our quest for pleasure.

4. ***Come to appreciate "satisfaction" over "excitement."*** Unlike excitement, there is *no* limit to the amount of satisfaction you can pursue. You can never become addicted to real peace! Substituting the pursuit of "satisfaction" for the pursuit of excitement can revolutionize your life. Excitement is a feeling of enjoyment, delight that comes from gratifying the senses. Satisfaction is more basic. It has a strong element of contentment. The whole theme of *contentment* is a fascinating one to me as a Christian psychologist. It surprises me how seldom it figures in most systems of psychotherapy – even Christian counseling. Paul tells us that "godliness with contentment is great gain" (1 Timothy 6:8). So choose it over discontentment. It will protect you from the pursuit of too much excitement – and a hidden addiction.