

# ONE PARISH ONE PRISONER

LEARNING MODULES

## ADDICTION

How do we understand this phenomenon?



Addiction of *some sort* is one of the most common struggles shared by men and women who end up imprisoned in America.

It's very likely that the person you are building a relationship with in prison has suffered immensely through the chaos of substance abuse. Meth. Heroin. Cocaine. Pills. Alcoholism. Those are the obvious ones. But there's also addiction to toxic relationships—codependency and physical abuse; to gang belonging, political belonging, the power, drama and identity these offer.

The perennial question many face here is “Why do people repeat behavior that clearly destroys their lives?”

In one sense, it's an ancient question.

The Apostle Paul, who wrote much of the New Testament as prison letters, confesses the heart of this struggle in a letter to a group in Rome: “I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate” (Romans 7:15).

It’s also a contemporary field of important and ongoing study. So, to be clear: we are not chemical dependency professionals. Nor do we want anyone on our teams to feel they need to be—nor try to be—in order to walk with faithfulness alongside someone with addiction struggles.

And so, this month’s segment cannot honor the volumes of traditions around addiction. Instead, we want to offer some new lenses through which to look at addiction. Not only your releasing friend’s possible addiction history and recovery road ahead, but also the hidden addictions in our own families, congregations, and personal lives.

The point in all of this, remember, is mutual transformation. That we find unexpected kinship with our incarcerated friend. That Christ will meet us as we more authentically meet one another, see one another. This is part of unbinding ourselves, gently removing the layers that cover our shared wounds, our shared humanity.

For this month’s group discussion, please

- Read the two brief insights below
- WATCH THE TED TALK ON ADDICTION & HUMAN CONNECTION  
(Transcribed at end of Module PDF for those that aren’t able to watch online.)
- LISTEN TO THE BRILLIANT PODCAST EPISODE linked below. It’s quite possibly the richest, broadest conversation on addiction we’ve found. It may offend you, inspire you, but will certainly open new conversation and compassion.

## 1. ADDICTION IS SELF-MEDICATION—TO NUMB PAIN

Globally recognized addiction expert Dr. Gabor Mate says we shouldn’t be asking, “*Why the addiction?*” but rather, “*Why the pain?*”

Folks locked up for the chaos of their addictions are often survivors of immense traumas. Child abuse, violence in the home growing up, lack of nurturing environments, gang violence, being passed through the foster system like unwanted goods, broken relationships. There is shame and guilt with what has been done to them—and even more piled on from what they’ve done to themselves and others.

The heart of recovery work—and our role in supporting our incarcerated friend—is not in managing behavior and sobriety, but creating a relationship of safety and curiosity to explore the root pains beneath the numbing behaviors.

Whether our friend is sober or relapsing, openly engaging recovery or trying to avoid it, our role is to build relationships of compassion and trust. In this kind of relationship, healing of past

and present pain can gently, slowly happen. The fears and wounds we run from with secrecy, drugs, isolation, anger can be opened—to God’s love, forgiveness, and healing.

## 2. ADDICTION IS ISOLATION.

Recovery Is Learning How to Trust Again.

Our friends at New Earth Recovery in Skagit Valley point us toward the video below and it’s profound statement: the opposite of addiction is not sobriety; *it’s connection*. Most of our wounds are interpersonal. So most self-medicating addictions (and the lies we believe) are *how we deal with the pain of cutting ourselves off from others and the hurt we’ve experienced*.

Our goal is not to become competent addiction counselors. What your team offers is a nest of new connections. New relationships. Our incarcerated friend will hopefully engage their (often probation-required) outpatient treatment evaluations and groups. You can support them in that if they choose it. But again, you are not their addiction counselors or accountability structure. The magic and power of what we *can* do is engage in the kinds of deeper relationship that re-train the fearful brain into ongoing, safe attachment.

Our work is to be open to this bumpy ride of learning to trust each other.

As we admit how terrifying it is to come out from behind our middle-class “I’m-doing-great”-facades, we can appreciate how much courage it takes our releasing friends to risk vulnerability in dropping their addictions, street facades, and other survival behaviors that have protected them for so long.

This is the heart of the material this month:

TED TALK: Everything You Think You Know About Addiction Is Wrong

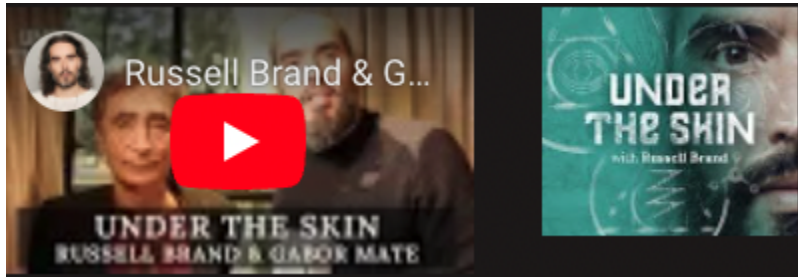


<https://youtu.be/PY9DclMGxMs> or See Transcription at end of Module PDF.

### 3. BONUS MATERIAL: ADDICTION IS EVERYWHERE!

If you have time, treat yourself to the wild interview below that explores a new addiction angle on everything from shopping to political leadership. Watch with a friend. Listen on your podcast app while driving. While we can't endorse all the opinions and even language in between these two unique minds, we think it is powerful to stir us into much larger thinking together.

You can listen to the episode on whatever podcast platform you use on your phone. Search "Under the Skin w/ Russel Brand" and find the "Gabor Mate" episode. Enjoy.



(Video link: <https://youtu.be/C-mJnYmdVmQ>)

#### ACTION STEPS

- WRITE YOUR INCARCERATED FRIEND: Tell him or her about how addiction has affected your family or friends. Or maybe yourself.
- LISTEN TO THE INTERVIEW ABOVE. You'll be glad you did.

#### FOR DISCUSSION

- How has addiction affected your family, your story? This is the foundation of all larger reflections.
- How might seeing addiction as a numbing-of-pain help you better appreciate whatever addictions your incarcerated friend might struggle with? Connecting these dots will help you unlearn judgmental impulses towards him/her, and deepen your ability to care.
- What kinds of pain do you, people in your group, hide and numb in other normal, acceptable ways? How are these numbing behaviors (while legal or acceptable) hurting you? How do they further isolate you from more authentic relationships with each other, the world, and God?

- How can your One Parish One Prisoner team, your growing relationships with your person, and your larger church/community, be like a “Rat Park” for your partner with long experiences of isolation?
- If connection is what we most seek, how does that refocus our goal—away from trying to figure out re-entry details... to maintaining and building human connection with our person? What keeps us from offering that connection we all need?

# TED TALK: Everything You Think You Know About Addiction Is Wrong

Source: <https://youtu.be/PY9DclMGxMs>

Speaker: Johann Hari - London, England

"One of my earliest memories is of trying to wake up one of my relatives and not being able to. I was just a little kid so I didn't really understand why, but as I got older, I realized we had drug addiction in my family, including later cocaine addiction.

I've been thinking about it a lot lately partly because it's now exactly 100 years since drugs were first banned in the United States and Britain, and we then imposed that on the rest of the world. It's a century since we made this really fateful decision to take addicts and punish them and make them suffer because we believe that would deter them; that would give them an incentive to stop.

And a few years ago I was looking at some of the addicts in my life, who I love, and trying to figure out if there was some way to help them. And I realized there were loads of incredibly basic questions I just didn't know the answer to. Like, what really causes addiction? Why do we carry on with this approach that doesn't seem to be working? Is there a better way out there that we could try instead? So I read loads of stuff about it and I didn't really find the answers I was looking for. So I thought, okay, I'll go and sit with different people around the world who have lived this and studied this and talk to them and see if I could learn from them. And it ended up, I didn't realize I would end up going over 30,000 miles at the start, but I ended up meeting loads of different people from a transgender crack dealer in Brownsville, Brooklyn, to a scientist who spends a lot of time feeding hallucinogens to mongooses just to see if they like them -- it turns out they do, but only in very specific circumstances -- to the only country that has decriminalized all drugs, from cannabis to crack, Portugal. And the thing I realized that really blew my mind is: Almost everything we think we know about addiction is wrong. And if we start to absorb the new evidence about addiction, I think we're going to have to change a lot more than our drug policies.

But let's start with what we think we know. What I thought I know, right? Think about this middle row over here, right? Imagine all of you, for 20 days now, went off and used heroin 3 times a day. Some of you look a bit more enthusiastic than others at this prospect. Don't worry, it's just a thought experiment. Imagine you did that, right? What would happen? Now, we have a story about what would happen that we've been told for centuries. We think that because there are chemical hooks in heroin, as you took it for a while, your body would become dependent on those hooks, you'd start to physically need them, and at the end of those 20 days, you'd all be heroin addicts, right? That's what I thought.

First thing that alerted me to the fact that there's something not right with this story, is when it was explained to me, if I step out of this TED Talk today and I get hit by a car and I break my hip, I'll be taken to the hospital and I'll be given loads of diamorphine. Diamorphine is heroin. It's actually much better heroin than you're going to buy on the street because the stuff you buy from a drug deal is contaminated and actually very little of it is heroin. Whereas the stuff you get from the doctor is medically pure. And you'll be given it for quite a long period of time. There are loads of people in this room who may not realize you've taken quite a bit of heroin, right? And anyone watching this anywhere in the world, this is happening. And, if what

we *believe* about addiction is right, those people are exposed to all those chemical hooks. What should happen? They should become addicts.

This has been studied really carefully, it doesn't happen. You will have noticed if your grandmother had a hip replacement, she didn't come out as a junkie. And when I learned this, it just seemed so weird to me - so contrary to everything I'd been told, to everything I thought I knew - I just thought it couldn't be right. Until I went and met a man called Bruce Alexander, he's a professor of psychology in Vancouver, who carried out an incredible experiment that I think really helps us to understand this issue.

Professor Alexander explained to me, the idea of addiction we've all got in our heads, that story, comes partly from a series of experiments that were done earlier in the 20th century. They're really simple experiments you can do them tonight when you go home if you feel a little bit sadistic. You get a rat and you put it in a cage and you give it 2 water bottles. One is just water and the other is water laced with either heroin or cocaine. If you do that, the rat will almost always prefer the drug water and almost always kill itself quite quickly. So there you go, right? That's how we think it works.

In the 70's Professor Alexander comes along and he looks at this experiment and he noticed something. He said "Ah, we're putting the rat in an empty cage. It's got nothing to do except use these drugs. Let's try something a bit different." So, Professor Alexander built a cage that he called Rat Park, which is basically heaven for rats, right? They've got loads of cheese, they've got loads of colored balls, they've got loads of tunnels. Crucially, they've got lots of friends, they can have loads of sex, and they've got both the water bottles - the normal water and the drug water. But here's the fascinating thing, in Rat Park they don't like the drug water. They almost never use it, none of them ever use it compulsively. None of them ever overdose. You go from almost a hundred percent overdose when they're isolated to zero percent overdose when they have happy and connective lives.

Now, when I first saw this Professor Alexander thought "Ya know, maybe this is just a thing about rats, they're quite different to us - maybe not as different as we'd like - but ya know. But, fortunately, there was a human experiment with the exact same principle happening at the exact same time. It was called the Vietnam War. In Vietnam, 20% of all American Troops were using loads of heroin. And, if you look at the news reports of the time, they were really worried. They were like "My God, we're going to have hundreds of thousands of junkies on the streets of the United States when the war ends." It made total sense. Now, those soldiers who were using loads of heroine were followed home. The archives of general psychiatry did a really detailed study on what happened to them. It turns out, they didn't go to rehab. They didn't go into withdrawal. Ninety-five percent of them just stopped.

Now, if you believe the story about chemical hooks that makes absolutely no sense. But Professor Alexander began to think there might be a different story about addiction. He said, "What if addiction isn't about your chemical hooks? What if addiction is about your cage? What if addiction is an adaptation to your environment?"

Looking at this, there was another professor called Peter Cohen in the Netherlands, who said, "Maybe we shouldn't even call it addiction. Maybe we should call it bonding." Human beings have a natural and innate need to bond. And when we're happy and healthy, we bond and connect with each other. But if you can't do that because you're traumatized or isolated or beaten down by life, you will bond with something that will give you some sense of relief. Now,

that might be gambling, that might be pornography, that might be cocaine, that might be cannabis, but you will bond and connect with something because that's our nature. That's what we want as human beings.

And I think, you know, at first I found this a quite difficult thing to get my head around. But one way it helped me to think about it is, I can see that I've got over by my seat there a bottle of water, right? And I'm looking at lots of you and lots of you have bottles of water with you, right? Forget drugs. Forget the drug war. Totally legally, all of those bottles of water could be bottles of vodka, right? We could all be getting drunk -- I might after this -- but we're not, right? Now, because you've been able to afford the approximately gazillion pounds that it costs to get into a TED Talk, I'm guessing you guys could afford to be drinking vodka for the next 6 months. You wouldn't end up homeless. You're not going to do that. And the reason you're not going to do that is not because anyone's stopping you. It's because you've got bonds and connections that you want to be present for. You've got work you love. You've got people you love. You've got healthy relationships. And a core part of addiction, I came to think, and I believe the evidence suggests, is about not being able to bear being present in your life.

Now, this has really significant implications. The most obvious implication is for the war on drugs, right? In Arizona, I went out with a group of women, who were made to wear t-shirts saying that "I was a drug addict" and go out on chain gangs and dig graves while members of the public jeer at them. And when those women get out of prison, they're going to have criminal records that mean they'll never work in the legal economy again.

Now, that's a very extreme example obviously, in the case of the chain gang, but actually almost everywhere in the world we treat addicts, to some degree, like that. We punish them. We shame them. We give them criminal records. We put barriers between them reconnecting.

And there was a doctor in Canada, Dr. Gabor Maté, an amazing man who said to me, "If you wanted to design a system that would make addiction worse, you would design that system." Now, there's a place that decided to do the exact opposite, and I went there to see how it worked. In the year 2000, Portugal had one of the worst drug problems in Europe. One percent of the population was addicted to heroin, which is kind of mindblowing. And every year, they tried to American way more and more. They punished people and stigmatized them, and shamed them more. And every year the problem got worse.

And one day, the Prime Minister and the leader of the opposition got together, and basically said, look, we can't go on with a country where we're having ever more people becoming heroin addicts. Let's set up a panel of scientists and doctors to figure out what would genuinely solve the problem. And they set up a panel led by an amazing man called Dr. João Goulão, to look at all this new evidence, and they came back and they said, "Decriminalize all drugs from cannabis to crack, but" - and this is the crucial next step - "take all the money we used to spend on cutting the addicts off, on disconnecting them, and spend it instead on reconnecting them with society."

And that's not really what we think of as drug treatment in the United States and Britain. So they do do residential rehab, they do psychological therapy, that does have some value. But the biggest thing they did was the complete opposite of what we do: a massive program of job creation for addicts, and microloans for addicts to set up small businesses.



So say you used to be a mechanic. When you're ready, they'll go to a garage, and they'll say, if you employ this guy for a year, we'll pay half his wages. The goal is to make sure that every addict in Portugal has something to get out of bed for in the morning. And when I went and met the addicts in Portugal, it was fascinating, what they said is, *as they rediscovered purpose, they rediscovered bonds and relationships with the wider society.*

It'll be 15 years this year since that experiment began (when TED Talk aired in 2015), and the results are in: injecting drug use is down in Portugal, according to the British Journal of Criminology, by 50 percent. Five-zero percent. Overdose is massively down, HIV is massively down among addicts. Addiction in every study is significantly down. One of the ways you know it's worked so well is that almost nobody in Portugal wants to go back to the old system.

Now, that's the kind of political implications. I actually think there's a layer of implications to all this research below that. We live in a culture where people feel really increasingly vulnerable to all sorts of addictions, whether it's to their smartphones or to shopping or to eating. You know, before these talks begin - you guys know this - we were told we weren't allowed to have our smartphones on, and I have to say, a lot of you looked an awful lot like addicts who were told their dealer was going to be unavailable for the next couple of hours.

And a lot of us feel like that, and it might sound weird to say, oh you know, I've been talking about how disconnection is a major driver of addiction and it's weird to say it's growing, because you think we're the most connected society that's ever been, surely. But I increasingly began to think that the connections we have, or think we have, are like a kind of parody of human connection.

If you have a crisis in your life, you'll notice something. It won't be your Twitter followers who come to sit with you. It won't be your Facebook friends who help you turn it around. It'll be your flesh and blood friends who you have deep and nuanced and textured, face-to-face relationships with. And there's a study I learned about from Bill McKibben, the environmental writer, that I think tells us a lot about this. It looked at the number of close friends the average American believes they can call on in a crisis. That number has been declining steadily since the 1950s. The amount of floor space an individual has in their home has been steadily increasing and I think that's like a metaphor for the choice we've made as a culture. We've traded floorspace for friends, we've traded stuff for connections, and the result is we are one of the loneliest societies there has ever been.

And Bruce Alexander, the guy who did the Rat Park experiment, says, "we talk all the time in addiction about individual recovery, and it's right to talk about that, but we need to talk much more about social recovery." Something's gone wrong with us, not just with individuals but as a group, and we've created a society where, for a lot of us, life looks a whole lot more like that isolated cage and a whole lot less like Rat Park.

If I'm honest, this isn't why I went into it, right? I didn't go in to discover the political stuff, the social stuff. I wanted to know how to help the people I love. And when I came back from this long journey and I'd learned all this, I looked at the addicts in my life, and you know, if you're really candid, it's hard loving an addict, and there's going to be lots of people who know in this room. You're angry a lot of the time. And I think one of the reasons why this debate is so charged is because it runs through the heart of each of us, right? Everyone has a bit of them that looks at an addict and thinks, "I wish someone would just stop you."

And the kind of scripts we're told for how to deal with the addicts in our lives is typified by, I think, the reality show "Intervention," if you guys have ever seen it. I think everything in our lives is defined by reality TV, but that's another TED Talk. If you've ever seen the show "Intervention," it's a pretty simple premise. Get an addict, all the people in their life, gather them together, confront them with what they're doing, and they say, "If you don't shape up, we're going to cut you off." Right? So what they do is they take the connection to the addict, and they threaten it, they make it contingent on the addict behaving the way they want.

And I began to think, I began to see why that approach doesn't work, and I began to think that's almost like the importing of the logic of the Drug War into our private lives. So I was thinking, how could I be Portuguese, right? And what I've tried to do now, and I can't tell you I do it consistently and I can't tell you it's easy, is *to say to the addicts in my life **that I want to deepen the connection with them, to say to them, I love you whether you're using or you're not. I love you, whatever state you're in, and if you need me, I'll come and sit with you because I love you and I don't want you to be alone or to feel alone.*** And I think the core of that message - you're not alone, we love you - has to be at every level of how we respond to addicts, socially, politically and individually.

For 100 years now, we've been singing war songs about addicts. I think all along we should have been singing love songs to them, because the opposite of addiction is not sobriety. The opposite of addiction is connection.

Thank you."