

Chapter 1

The Cycle of Addictive Behaviors

When I first came across this title I thought it sounded pretty scary. Addictive behaviors to me meant drug abuse, violence – why would I need to know about such serious stuff? Then the more I investigated it I realized it covers a wide range of behaviors that can be regarded as addictive. It relates to the person who keeps winding up in the same unhappy sort of relationships. Or the person who keeps reacting in the same unproductive ways when confronted with similar situations. So it doesn't need to be that 'heavy stuff' but more behaviors, that when you analyse them, keep occurring.

Humans are creatures of habits and we like things to be largely predictable, even if it's simple everyday things. I'd hate to wake in the morning and know that the kitchen was going to be in a different place each day! Or that my place of work had moved and nobody told me! Or that when I got home the house wasn't there anymore! Crazy stuff but it does demonstrate we like a certain amount of predictability in our lives.

It would seem that way with relationships also. If in my role of therapist someone came to me and told me their life story (with a little probing from me) and it seemed that there were regular patterns being set up in the events they were talking about, I would pick up on these. Often the person telling the story is not aware of the similarities in their stories. It could be something like this from 'Sally' (a fictitious character):

“I never have enough time for myself. The kids need lots of attention, they

have just started riding lessons that take up a few days of the week. My husband has just started a new job. It's great because he's earning so much more money but he's also working longer hours, poor thing. My own work is so demanding. I've just been asked to take on more responsibility at work which is great because it means I'm finally being recognised but there aren't enough hours in the day. We've also just bought another property for investment purposes and we're renovating that madly. My husband expects me to do all the household chores which is fair enough because he is very busy at work and works long hours. My father has recently become ill and my other two sisters can't care for him because they live in the country so that's taxing on me

Get the drift? Here is someone who never has time for herself and it's totally justified despite the fact that she is always tired and has started to become very anxious and snappy. That's the 'cognitive dissonance' part of the equation where we justify what is happening to us so that it seems in perspective (see Chapter 2 for further discussion on this). She knows something is not quite right but can't seem to connect the pieces of the story together because it seems quite normal – the kids; the husband; her father; not enough time; life is busy.....

I would help her start to see the links in her story that paint a picture of someone who needs to be busy; needs to be caring for others; needs to feel anxious and can't have quality time for herself. Now telling someone

this is not easy because we can get quite defensive – it clashes with that cognitive dissonance. It can leave us vulnerable, asking such questions as “where would I go from here?”

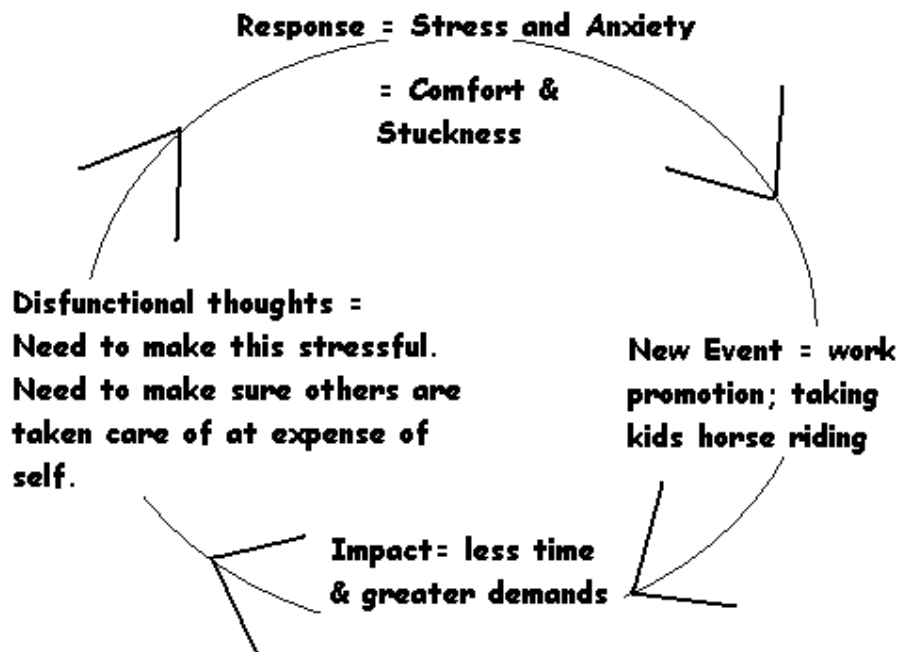
Looking into people’s past is often a good indication of where these behaviors have been learnt. With Sally her behaviors were ‘needs to be busy; needs to be caring for others; needs to feel anxious and can’t have quality time for herself’. If I probed Sally and asked her about the relationships in her family when she was growing up there may well be some links there. She might say something like:

“Well mum was often quite anxious. I remember once she had to have some time in hospital because she was so run down. But life was normal. I don’t really think it was that stressful. Mum and dad split up when I was 12 and they argued a fair bit. I really felt sorry for mum and tried to help her out as much as possible. I was the oldest of 4 sisters so I used to be responsible for making sure they were ready for school and all that sort of thing.”

Again Sally is telling us a perfectly normal story that happens to many of us in our daily lives. The thing for Sally though is that it has become a problem. She has become anxious (a predisposition she has inherited from her mother) and she has set up a lifestyle that for most of her life she has been quite used to. There was a period in her life when she was single where life was cruisy. She seemed to have more fun and more time to enjoy herself. However now she was in a family environment with her own husband and children she has borrowed from her memories and

behaviors as a child. This has led to her largely replicating a lot of things that happened to her growing up – living in a household that really was quite stressful and frantic, even though she didn't see it that way at the time or in fact did not see it that way up until recently.

We could describe Sally's addictive behaviors in a diagram. It may look something like this"



Once this conscious awareness has occurred then there is room for change. One can't force change on another. If this process seems foreign to someone then it will not work. But, if like Sally and no doubt you, because you are ready for change and ready to do something then the awareness is easier to view and comprehend. It must be stressed though that our minds, because of that cognitive dissonance, will be resistant to change. It will come up with a hundred and one ways why it can't change. "I can't do it this week because my husband is off interstate on a business

trip so I'm going to be far busier than usual". Sounds reasonable enough but you can bet your bottom dollar that in two months time if this person really isn't ready to change yet there will be other equally valid reasons (or excuses?!) as to why change cannot occur now.

I have also had people in similar situations to Sally, pat themselves on the back and said they have been able to free up time and they've done that by cutting down on their counselling appointments and not going to the gym anymore – two things that were actually benefiting them! Where's that whip and let's beat each other one more time! We humans are complex beings.