

## **What is Addiction? – How Can Thriving: Recover Your Life Help Me?**

### **The Attachment Center**

Did you know that there is a specific area of the brain—the attachment center—that is responsible for helping you attach to another person in relationship? Amazingly, research suggests that this area of the brain is the foundation for the entire region of the brain that helps us experience and regulate emotions. When this area of the brain is securely attached to others (including God) in healthy joy-filled relationships, we can have tremendous capacity to enjoy life and relationships. When life is characterized by joy—and positive emotions it affects every region of the brain. When the attachment center is well developed, everything we think, do or say is changed.

The attachment center lies at the foundation for every other area of the brain that is responsible for emotions and relationship. It builds a foundation for the ability to feel—but not become stuck in negative emotions such as sadness, anger, fear or shame. When the attachment center is not working well, our ability to make decisions— and live from the hearts Jesus gave us is impaired. Life is painful, filled with anxiety and dominated by feelings of loneliness, shame, fear, isolation and sadness. Even our cognitive functioning is impaired.

God created the attachment center to attach to him and others in joy-filled and mutually fulfilling relationships. He designed us so that our entire brain functions best in joyful, honest and loving relationships. Without these attachments, the attachment center, and the entire brain function in a state of ongoing emotional and cognitive distress.

In this state of distress, and absence of secure attachment, the brain's attachment center will “latch onto” anything that provides a sense of connection and pleasure. This complex neurochemical process takes without our conscious awareness. All we are aware of is that for some reason, we feel better—or at least don't feel quite so bad. The problem is that once the attachment center attaches to someone or something, it does not want to let go, and begins to rely on the attachment to help regulate emotions and pleasure in the brain. When these attachments grow, they literally hijack the attachment center—and the entire brain. Does this sound a lot like addiction?

### **What is Addiction?**

In Thriving, we describe addiction as “An attachment to a Behavior, Event, Experience, Person or Substance (BEEPS) that is used to regulate emotion, increase pleasure or decrease pain.” BEEPS is a very useful concept, because it describes the neurochemical process of attachment that is at the root of all addictions. In addition, BEEPS can have a variety of forms. To the attachment center of the brain, Sex, Food, Work, Performance, Alcohol, Drugs, Gambling or Thrill Seeking Behaviors can all help change how we feel, decrease pain or increase pleasure. Once the brain has attached to BEEPS and is using the BEEPS to regulate emotions, pleasure and pain, BEEPS then take on a unique life of their own. In this way, BEEPS literally hijack the attachment center of the brain—and eventually alter the functioning of the entire brain.

BEEPS is also useful because it does not stigmatize certain attachments – and excuse others as more “socially acceptable.” To the brain, attachments to work, performance or thrill-seeking behaviors function in the same way as attachments to cocaine or alcohol. The only difference is that attachments to cocaine or alcohol cause secondary problems that are much less

socially acceptable, and potentially more destructive. In terms of the ability to have healthy, joy-filled relationships with God and others – the impact of BEEPS causes us all to miss the mark.

Lack of secure attachment and the experience of unresolved life trauma can make the brain highly vulnerable to BEEPS. The lack of pleasure and inability of the attachment center to consistently help regulate dopamine (the chemical that helps us feel pleasure) create optimal conditions for BEEPS attachment. Since we are unique individuals, BEEPS may all impact us to varying degrees, and what feels pleasurable to one person may not feel very good to another. But when a poorly developed attachment center encounters a BEEPS that does feel create strong feelings of pleasure, it is much more likely to attach to it.

### **Thriving, Attachment and Relationships**

God created the attachment center to attach to other people and to Him in secure, loving and joy-filled relationships. In the context of this kind of relationship, the attachment center grows, properly regulates dopamine and helps regulate emotions appropriately. The brain heals from BEEPS attachments in the same way.

In Thriving, much of our focus is on the development of relationship skills that promotes joyful and loving bonding. Sobriety—or the absence of BEEPS is essential, but does not heal the attachment center. Sobriety is simply a condition in which BEEPS are not being used to regulate emotions, pleasure or pain. The attachment center heals only in the context of healthy relationships with joy-filled people who are glad to be with us. These relationships with God and others: Build a healthy attachment center, Allow us to regulate emotions consistently, Improve cognitive functioning, and allow us to freely cooperate with the work of the Holy Spirit in us. This results in the development of ongoing maturity—and allows us to live freely from the Heart that Jesus Gave us.

As a result, Thriving is very focuses on three primary areas. First, Thriving emphasizes teaching participants about the brain, joy and relationships. It is important for participants to understand how God has created the brain, and how it is impacted by relationships, trauma and BEEPS. It is also vital that they understand the process by which the brain heals.

Second, Thriving focuses on inner healing. This is essential, because inner healing is the process of allowing Jesus to heal the deep wounds in our lives that keep us from being able to attach to him and to others. It is the process of allowing Jesus to comfort us in our distress, so that we are able to cooperate with him and be able to comfort others when they are in distress. In this way, Jesus removes the blockages in our lives that have kept us stuck, and set up for BEEPS.

Finally, Thriving stresses the positive relationship skills that help build the attachment center. In every Thriving session, participants learn and have the opportunity to practice exercises that teach relationship skills and help heal the brain. The exercises are all different, and many focus on different regions of the brain. Exercises have included: Learning how to listen to God, Relaxing with your partner, Non-verbal joy-building, Building appreciation and Learning to tell stories.

By focusing on training, inner healing and exercises that build relationships and the brain, Thriving is helping participants grow in joy, healthy identity and maturity. As joy builds in secure relationships, our capacity to handle the stress and problems of everyday life grow also. We are becoming mature—and growing up into the identity and life that Jesus gave us. And because Thriving promotes ongoing spiritual, emotional and relational maturity, it is useful as a small group model that can be used in recovery centers, support groups and as a discipleship strategy for the local church.

## **Are You Thriving?**

Thriving: Recover Your Life is now meeting in churches in both California and in North Carolina. The creators of Thriving, Dr. Jim Wilder and Ed Khouri are each leading these groups. Jim's group meets Pasadena First Church of the Nazarene on Wednesday nights at 7:00 pm. Ed's group meets at New Life Christian Fellowship in Taylorsville, North Carolina on Thursday night at 6:45. You are welcome to visit these groups.

Because Thriving is a support group, you are always welcome! You are also welcome to bring a friend or your spouse with you. Practicing these exercise with a person with whom you share a bond is always best. But if you are coming to Thriving without a partner you can still learn and practice all the exercises. We have found that practicing the relationship and joy-building exercises in groups of 3 people works well for those who do not have a friend or spouse with them.

If you would like more information about Thriving—or would like to find out how you can be Thriving, Ed is available to present Thriving at your location. You can also find out more information about Thriving on our website: [www.equippinghearts.com](http://www.equippinghearts.com)—or at Jim Wilder's website at: [www.lifemodel.org](http://www.lifemodel.org). Have a new year in which your life and family are Thriving!

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