

William Glasser, M.D.

**POSITIVE
ADDICTION**

**The author of REALITY THERAPY and
TAKE EFFECTIVE CONTROL OF YOUR LIFE
tells you how to gain strength and
self-esteem through positive behavior**

POSITIVE ADDICTION

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To my mother and father in the
sixtieth year of their marriage

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one

STRENGTH—WHEN YOU HAVE IT AND WHEN YOU DON'T

Very few of us realize how much we choose the misery in our lives. Even when we do, we still go ahead with the disastrous choice because we are convinced that we don't have the strength to choose better. A child doesn't give up in school, or a wife on her marriage, because each believes it's a good move. They give up because they no longer have the strength to keep up the struggle. I will first describe in detail how weakness is the cause of almost all the unfortunate choices we make. Then I will argue that anyone who wishes to become stronger seriously consider trying to become an addict.

If you accept the usual definition of addict, this is probably as far as you will read here because to you, and until recently to me, an addict is someone whose life is destroyed by heroin, alcohol, or gambling, and often the lives of those around him are ruined too. Smoking until you are short of breath and risking cancer, or eating until you are so obese you become repulsive to yourself and others, do not make you attractive. Everyone knows that too much coffee can make you nervous and sleepless, yet how many people can kick the coffee habit? I don't deny the truth in these common examples of addiction; but I do claim that addiction is not all bad. To the contrary. I believe there are a number of addictions that are as good as the above-named addictions are harmful. I call them *positive addictions* because they *strengthen us and make our lives more satisfying*. They exist in sharp contrast to the common or *negative addictions* like alcohol or heroin, which always weaken and often destroy us. While the concept is new, the practices I call positive addictions are not. They exist at present for thousands of

people, a great number of whom are aware that they have a strong habit but few of whom think of themselves as addicted. Many of them are, however, and in this book I will call them positive addicts because, due to their addictions, they are almost always stronger than nonpositively addicted people who lead similar lives. With this added strength they live with more confidence, more creativity, and more happiness, and usually in much better health.

To begin let's examine what happens when we don't have enough strength to find the happiness that I believe most of us want more than anything else from our lives. There are those who would argue that just staying alive is the prime human need, but if we take a careful look at ourselves and those we know, that argument makes little sense. Certainly many people do cling to life when they are miserable and have almost no hope for happiness. They hang on, however, not because life itself is so rewarding but because of the old but accurate cliché, where there's life there's hope. If just staying alive were such an overpowering need, then suicide would be rare, which it is not. Each year at least fifty thousand people in the United States alone, most of whom are in good health, become convinced that there is no hope, no chance for fulfillment, pleasure, recognition, or whatever it is that most of us call happiness. They kill themselves because death seems preferable to the lives they are presently living. Besides suicide, there is also abortion which, wherever it is legal, is now about as common as birth. I am not arguing the pros and cons of abortion, but I think in most cases when a mother decides to abort her child she does so because either her happiness or the happiness of her unborn child is at stake. It is a rare abortion today that takes place because the mother's life is in danger. Finally, although this is much less frequent because, unlike abortion, it is always illegal, mercy killing is

motivated by the belief that there is more to living than just staying alive. These are powerful arguments that, for those strong enough to find them, fulfillment, pleasure, recognition, a sense of personal value, a sense of worth, the enjoyment of loving and being loved are not optional, they are the facts of life.

Each individual finds them in his or her own way, but in general everyone finds them through: (1) love—that is, through loving and being loved, and (2) by doing something one believes is worthwhile. From the time we are tiny we are told what is worthwhile and perhaps even more what is not. First by our parents, later by our teachers, employers, friends, ministers, neighbors, politicians, editors, we are bombarded with what we should and shouldn't do. We soon learn the pleasure of doing right and the pain of doing wrong. As we grow, we should learn to judge for ourselves what is worthwhile, but it takes a great deal of strength to do what is right when few people will agree with us for doing it. Most of us spend our lives in a series of compromises between doing what we believe in and doing what will please those who are important to us. Happiness depends a great deal on gaining enough strength to live with a minimum of these compromises. It is never as simple as when we are small, riding our two-wheeler and yelling. "Look, Ma, no hands ..." or as totally accepted as an adult stepping on the surface of the moon, but no matter what it is, any accomplishment that gains some recognition brings us pleasure and the lack of accomplishment is always accompanied by pain. The recognition can be immediate or delayed. Sometimes we have to wait a long time for the payoff, but if we never get any recognition for accomplishment our lives are miserable. I need not discuss love because obviously it feels good when we have it and it hurts terribly when we don't.

To find the happiness we all desire we have to figure out: (1) what to do, (2) how to do it, and (3) *where to get the strength to get it done*. In the struggle for love and worth, what to do and how to do it are rarely difficult. If anything is possible, we usually have some idea of *what* could make us happy. Then coming up with some idea of *how* to do it is usually not that hard either. Even when we seem to be hung up on what to do or how to do it this hang-up is rarely the real problem. The problem is we don't have the *strength* to do what will make us happy. It is hard for us to admit to ourselves that we don't have what it takes so we tend to rationalize, to weep and wail about not knowing what to do or how to do it. As much as we may complain, we usually know that what we lack is not the know-how. but the strength.

As much as we need more strength, however, at some particular time in our lives we have a certain amount. For most of us there is no easy way to get more. If we had more strength we could have better lives, but we don't, so too many of us have to settle for less than we would like to have. When I say this I'm not talking only about the very weak who lead obviously miserable lives, I'm talking about almost everyone. Even people with considerable strength, when they look at their lives with candor, can usually see places where they settle for less. The simple statement we sometimes say out loud but more often say to ourselves. "The hell with it," means we are settling for less because we don't have it in us now to struggle for more. We settle for less with our marriages, our children, our employers or employees, and our neighbors than we know we should. We drink, smoke, and eat too much because it's easier than disciplining ourselves to say no. I am not recommending that we should be more rigid or contentious, for that too is weakness. It takes strength, however, to be warm, firm, humorous, and caring and still do what we know we ought to do. Our lives would be much

better if we never said, “The hell with it!” This chapter is intended to explain in detail how people distort their lives to avoid the suffering that always accompanies the weakness that led us to give up and say, “The hell with it!”

There are times, not many but they do occur, when we really don’t know what to do. Even here we are best off if we have the strength to face this fact, to find a way to give up gracefully rather than to thrash around accomplishing nothing. We continue a futile effort because we don’t want to admit to ourselves that we don’t have the strength to quit. We are stuck because it takes more guts than we have to change our ways. For example, we may hopelessly court someone who doesn’t respond because we don’t believe we have the strength to get someone else. It takes a lot of strength to risk getting rejected by someone new, so we hang onto the one we know and say, “The hell with it,” because we are used to that pain. If we had more strength we would say not, “The hell with it,” but “*The hell with all this pain*, I’ll find someone else.” Weak people carry a torch for life, they “enjoy” wallowing in their misery. They do so partly in the hope that someone will feel sorry for them and solve their problems and partly, as I will shortly explain, because they believe it hurts less this way.

It may not be easy to find love and worth but it is not that hard either. It can’t be, because most people have the strength to find enough of both to be reasonably happy. There is, however, a large group of people in the world, literally millions here in our own country, who don’t have enough strength and because they don’t they are miserable. Each morning millions of them get up knowing that today is going to be a lousy, painful, miserable day. They may be depressed, anxious, angry, sick, or crazy, or they may be apathetic, but whatever they feel, behave, or think, they are locked into pain and misery because they don’t have the strength to change their way of life. Since the

obvious purpose of pain, misery, and suffering is to tell you something is wrong, fix it, change it, reform, improve, get help; if you don't have the strength to do it, you are stuck with the pain. This is not to say that people with strength don't suffer—they do. They have no immunity to life, but when they feel pain, they get moving or at least they try to do something, and the more strength they have the more successful their efforts are. There are lots of times, however, when there is nothing they can do. When this happens, as it does to all of us, those with strength just bear the pain while they figure out what to do. They prefer to suffer rather than do something irrational that might kill their chances ever to find happiness. Strong people wait a lot; they have discovered that time does heal many wounds.

In between the very strong, who are mostly happy, and the miserably weak are the partially strong or the almost strong enough. It is here that most of us exist, strong enough to get along fairly well but not strong enough to live without a lot of unnecessary suffering. It is mostly to this majority group in our society that this book is aimed. Many of us are far from inadequate but we are not strong enough to handle every part of a complex life adequately. We may have ample love but lose our jobs and fall apart, or we may have good jobs but get rejected in our private lives. If we haven't enough strength we attempt to reduce our suffering by partially giving up. We never throw the sponge in altogether but we tend to give up in part, to try to reduce pain that always comes when we can't get the job done. For example, a while back I worked voluntarily for four years in a very tough situation and every afternoon my head hurt. I don't consider myself weak, but part of me was saying, "Give up, don't suffer the problems of this miserable job." Another part of me was saying, "Hang in there." The part of me that wanted to give up was trying to make its point by causing my head to hurt so I could better

rationalize a decision to quit. I was either too strong or too stupid to quit but not so strong that I could do the job without headaches. When I finished the job with some success the headaches went away.

Let's discuss this whole concept of how misery leads to giving up. We will discuss it as though the person gives up completely, as many weak people do, but even more of us do so partly. The process, however, is exactly the same, only the degree differs. In any case, the best solution for all of us, weak or strong, is to get stronger. Too many of us are not in the fortunate position of being able to finish the job and get rid of the headaches.

GIVING UP—

THE FIRST CHOICE OF THE WEAK

What happens if you don't have the strength to begin to deal with the pain adequately? For the millions of people who don't, life is like having a toothache with no money to see a dentist. It doesn't hurt any less because you can't afford dental care —if anything it hurts more. In desperate attempts to get rid of pain, people without sufficient strength are driven to a choice that most of us with adequate strength never seriously contemplate. They choose to give up, a choice they feel forced to make because they don't believe anything else will relieve the pain of their situation. I am sure that to many people reading this book giving up is not a viable option. How can anyone even contemplate giving up when his only chance for happiness is to keep struggling for what he doesn't have: sufficient love and worth? Some give up completely and more give up partly, not because they don't want happiness—they want it as much as anyone else. They give up because at this miserable point in their lives, happiness is not even on their minds. What is on their minds is the hope that through giving up they will get relief from the constant

misery of not having and of believing they probably never will have what they need. If you were convinced, and believe me millions are, that continuing to try would result only in further failure, then after suffering your limit, it is likely you would conclude, “Why keep struggling? I won’t make it anyway.” The reason so many people give up is not that they want to accept lives of misery. They give up because it hurts more to keep trying when the effort always fails. These people are weak. They have already accepted the fact that life will be miserable; what’s on their minds is a way to make it less miserable. Just because the fox said the grapes were sour didn’t make them sour. What made them sour was the fact that he couldn’t reach them. It hurt less to stop jumping. If, however, another friendly but more agile fox had offered him a bunch of delicious grapes to prove to him that the grapes were good, he probably would have called him a troublemaker and avoided him. Most people who give up tend to stay away from people who succeed. After all, what player who barely breaks 100 wants to play golf regularly with someone who shoots par, no matter how charming he is?

Sisyphus, the Greek giant who aspired to be a god, was, for his presumption, doomed by the gods to eternal punishment. He was forced to push a large boulder up a mountain and just before the boulder reached the top of the mountain, as he was about to set it in place, a god would reach out and flick it all the way back down the mountain. Sisyphus then had to walk back down and start pushing the boulder up again, to do this each day for eternity. Many people believe themselves to be in much the same position. It seems to them that to find something worthwhile to do with their lives or to find someone who really cares about them is impossible, so why keep trying? Unlike Sisyphus, who was cursed by the gods so he couldn’t quit, if you and I pushed the boulder up a mountain once or twice only to have it flicked

down, we would say, “The hell with it, we quit.” We quit because the pain of attempting to find happiness and not finding it hurts much more than giving up. I maintain that almost everyone in ‘the Western World who makes the first choice of the weak, the choice to give up, makes it on the basis that he hasn’t the strength to keep trying. This doesn’t mean everyone gives up in the same way or by the same amount; there are certainly variations in what people do. Only a few give up completely but huge numbers settle for a lot less love or worth in their lives than they could have if they had the strength to work for more.

They don’t look at it that way. Their last concern is getting more, their first concern is hurting less. They may not be totally miserable but they are miserable enough and they want to hurt less. They may in some cases seem hardly to hurt at all, but we should keep in mind that we can never feel another person’s pain. They may even know how much happier they would be if they took a chance and tried for more, but they don’t believe they have the strength to succeed. Furthermore, because they are weak they tend to blot out of their minds what they might do to get stronger; they settle for a minimal life because they haven’t the strength for a better one.

I am sure that as you read these first paragraphs and on into the symptom choices that follow, you may recognize yourself in many places. While you may not give up completely, there are many times when, lacking strength, you settle for less or choose a symptom, as I chose headaches. Perhaps the beginning of gaining strength is becoming aware of the bad choices you make. Just knowing that you choose much of your misery yourself will help you get the idea that it may be worth trying to make a better choice. If you believe your misery just happens to you and you have no control over it, then you will never get much more than what you are getting now from life.

But there is a fact of life that keeps many of us from recognizing that we choose a lot of our misery. That fact is that for many of us the world we live in is miserable. If you argue that the world may be responsible for a great deal of our inability to make the right choices with our lives you have a lot of truth behind your argument.

For example, how can a child possibly gain the strength to succeed in school if he can't speak English or if his teacher is prejudiced against him or if he never gets breakfast and his stomach hurts so much that he can't concentrate? Is it his fault if he chooses to give up? Isn't it the fault of the system that denies him the chance to fulfill his needs? Isn't the system, for him, much like the curse of Sisyphus in that he must stay in school for ten to twelve years knowing he will never even get close to success? Of course, much human suffering is the system's fault. Of course, everyone in the world should be given a fighting chance for love and worth, and should be raised in a way that gives him or her the strength to fight for a fair share, but the facts are that the world is not the way many of us would like it to be. Therefore, while I believe it is the responsibility of strong people all over to work hard to make the world better, until they do, it remains the task of all of us, weak or strong, to do the best we can for ourselves. To tell a weak or inadequate person, as many well-meaning but misdirected social scientists and politicians do, that he isn't responsible for his misery because the world he lives in denies him a chance may be true. In practice, however, it only locks him further into weakness, into choosing to give up and then rationalizing, perhaps more accurately than the fox, that his world is sour. My job, as a psychiatrist and educator, is to try to help the weak grow stronger regardless of their situation. As a citizen I try to make the world better—that is my ongoing responsibility (it's yours, too). *But the thesis of this book is that many people, weak and*

strong, can help themselves to be stronger, and an important new path to strength may be positive addiction. If more of us gain strength maybe we will make a better world: there is little chance we will do so if too many of us are weak.

THE SYMPTOM CATEGORIES— THE SECOND CHOICE OF THE WEAK

Perhaps the best way to demonstrate what usually happens when someone, after giving up, decides to make the second choice is to join me in my office where I am seeing such a person for the first time. Ordinarily I start the conversation saying something like, “Well, tell me a little bit about the difficulty” or “What’s the problem?” or “What do you think is wrong?” Quite frequently he will look at me and very clearly, very calmly, and very pointedly say he is here because he is depressed. For him the first choice in dealing with life’s problems—to give up—is no longer satisfactory: the pain has returned and in a further attempt to reduce his suffering he has made one of the common second choices—to become depressed. Depression is no mystery. Everyone reading this book knows exactly what it is. We have all experienced at least mild episodes of depression many times in our lives, but when a person tells a psychiatrist that he is depressed, it is always serious. Even though he doesn’t actually speak the words. I assume he is saying much more. “Dr. Glasser, I am depressed and I have come to see you because I want you, as a psychiatrist, to help me get over the painful, miserable way I feel.” So with that he throws the ball to me. I have been in practice quite a while but this is always a tense moment because I know he expects that somehow or

other I will quickly help him to get rid of his pain. Regardless of what may have caused the depression, his fault or not, what is real to him is what he feels, and *he hurts*. He is on a hot stove and can't seem to get off. He is saying, "I have made a great effort to come here to your office [and for a depressed person that is a pretty big effort for which he may even want a little recognition] and I want something done by you to rid me of this misery now." The problem is that, right then, there is nothing I can do. I have no magic wand to dispel his pain. Sometimes, if I feel a great deal of pressure. I become facetious and say in a joking way, "I'll tell you what, cheer up!" Now when I tell what I have just written here to an audience, they always laugh: but why does it strike them so funny? What's so wrong with my advice? The man said he was upset, depressed, and miserable; he is seeking help *now*, so I say. "Cheer up, stop hurting!"

People laugh because they recognize the futility of that simplistic advice. We have all been depressed and been told by some well-meaning fool to cheer up, a bit of advice that strikes us at the time as about as helpful as bailing out the *Titanic* with a teacup. Sometimes the client takes me seriously for a moment and says. "What do you mean, cheer up? Didn't you hear me, I just told you that I am depressed. If I could cheer up, my God. I would! The problem is I can't, that's why I am here." What he is saying is true, but why doesn't he cheer up? Why does he cling so tenaciously to his misery? He clings to it, I believe, because, as miserable as he is, his depression has some value to him. As he sits in my office he isn't aware of this—he thinks his depression is the worst thing that has ever happened to him. What I contend is that he won't give up his depression because he believes, even though he isn't aware of this belief, that if he drops his depression, he will hurt more

than if he keeps it. As painful as his choice of depression is, it, like all the second choices, is less painful than the first choice of giving up.

All seriously depressed people (and many others whom I'll discuss shortly) choose one of four categories of symptoms very soon after they make the first choice. They had given up to reduce the severe pain of trying unsuccessfully to gain love and worth. Unfortunately, when you give up, while it was reduced for a while, the pain tends to return because you can't give up permanently on what you need for happiness without suffering. It may not hurt as much but it still hurts plenty, so this client and countless other people look around for something to reduce the pain again, and in the client's case, although like all those who make a second choice he is totally unaware that it is a choice, he chose depression. Depression is an extremely common choice, perhaps the most common symptom of all, but why does it reduce the pain?

Let me explain. Suppose the client says, "Dr. Glasser, look, I can't cheer up; my wife left me suddenly and moved in with someone else." He is trying to explain how terribly he has been put down, to make it clear why he can't cheer up. My answer would never be, though at times I must admit I am tempted, to tell him to go out and find another woman. He's had enough of that advice from his friends. He may anticipate my temptation by saying, "Please doctor, don't tell me to find someone else. Who'd be interested in me the way I am now?" He blames his inadequacy, his giving up, his immobility, and as we talk further most of his problems center on his depression. He has not the vaguest idea that he has *chosen* to be depressed. He doesn't realize that to a great extent the depression allows him to rationalize his problem. He doesn't realize that now he need not face his inadequacy because in his eyes he isn't inadequate, he is "sick." Painful as it is, the depression he has chosen is to

him less painful than facing his inadequacy, his giving up. With the first choice, giving up, he relinquished responsibility, but with the second choice, depression, he is now shielded from his inadequacy and able to turn to others. Like the fox he may call the grapes sour, but the main point is that since he isn't going to jump for them anymore anyway, he has a perfect excuse: Who can jump when he is so depressed? Furthermore, he is now in a better position to ask for help because almost no one holds a depressed man responsible for his misery. He may even reject help because he worries that if he does accept help he may eventually have to help himself. So what he does is to complain a lot, but hurt less, because his depression is now the protector of his inadequacy. His own feelings, painful as they may be, have become his friend.

He clings to depression because now the depression substitutes for the love and worth he is convinced he can no longer get in the real world. It may not be a good substitute but it's the best he has. To repeat, he becomes involved with it because, first, it rationalizes his quitting position and makes him more acceptable to himself. Second, it puts him in a position to ask for help, to try to get someone to do for him what he hasn't been able to do for himself. When he gave up, people tended to turn away from him as a quitter, but now that he is suffering, when he asks for help, when he says, "Pay attention to my obvious misery," it is likely someone will. It is common for him to test their concern by saying, "Leave me alone" in order to check out how much they really care. In my office, however, cooperative or not, he wants to be taken care of or at least to get some attention. He hasn't the strength to buckle down and help himself; if he had, he would not be depressed. Even an expert may fall into the trap of attempting to help him rather than helping him to help himself. His friends and family usually do and I plead guilty on more than

one occasion myself. He needs me, and no matter how many rejection games he plays I shouldn't reject him, but I shouldn't claim I can do very much for him either. I point out gently but firmly after we have made friends that he must help himself and I work with him to make a plan to do so. If he does help himself, then he will no longer need his depression, which right now he believes is his only "friend." If all he comes to my office for is to check out what I can offer and then reject it, he will pay a dear price in pain and misery. Most of us have paid this price on more than one occasion but not so often or for as long as those who see psychiatrists for depression.

With this example in mind, let's take a look at the chart below showing the four symptom categories—one or more of which are frequent second choices of the weak.

THE SECOND CHOICES OF THE WEAK THE FOUR MAJOR SYMPTOM CATEGORIES

- | SYMPTOM CATEGORIES | EXAMPLES OF COMMON SYMPTOMS |
|---------------------------|--|
| 1. To act out | tantrums, delinquency, crime, sociopathic and |
| 2. To become | psychopathic behavior |
| involved with | depressed, fearful, phobic, tense, anxious, sad, |
| your own | dejected, bitchy, griping, haughty, snide, angry, |
| emotions | hysterical, suspicious |
| 3. To become | crazy psychotic, paranoid, hallucinating, delusional, |
| conversion | reaction headaches, neckaches, backaches, sinus trouble, |
| reaction | migraine, |

4. Psychosomatic hypertension, heart disease, asthma, many allergies, duodenal ulcers, ileitis, colitis, chronic diarrhea, urinary urgency, arthritis

Although I will discuss these second choices as full-blown symptoms, almost all of us suffer mildly from one or more of them from time to time. When we say, “The hell with it,” many of us then choose category one to act out briefly in angry, irrational ways. We all experience temporary episodes of painful depression, tension, fears, and anxiety, category two. Few of us are exempt from an occasional “crazy” thought, and most of us suffer on and off from aches, pains, or mild chronic illnesses that don’t respond to medical treatment, categories three and four. We would have to have superhuman strength never to choose a symptom when we are temporarily frustrated or rejected, but the stronger we are the less we suffer from the choice.

Acting out, the first symptom category, is seen most often in children. When a little child is frustrated, when he doesn’t get the attention he wants, he often has a tantrum. He screams, yells, and cries because he has learned as a baby that if he creates a fuss, someone will attempt to solve his problem for him. As he grows older, if no one stops him, he usually moves from tantrums into incorrigible behavior. By his teenage years he fits into that huge catch-all group we call juvenile delinquents. He behaves as if what he wants is all that counts; the rules and regulations that apply to us don’t apply to him. Many adults continue in these ways—they become criminals, con men, psychopaths, behaving the way they want in an attempt to gain some power and recognition which may reduce the pain of their empty lives. Sometimes the behavior succeeds. They are able to break the rules successfully. This reinforces their choice; they become even more involved with themselves. They frequently become exhilarated with their own twisted success when things go their way. This adds to their rationalization that

“straight” people are fools, chumps, or mooches, as they are known to the men who con them. Most sociopathic people tend to get overconfident and disdainful of others while their behavior is working. They push those around them more and more until, sometimes, they get stopped by a court of law. While many of us never go so far as to wind up before a judge, still there are few of us—adults or children—doing only what we want, legal or illegal, who are able to continue indefinitely. Eventually our behavior may grow wild and self-destructive. Many a parent has seen his child in this situation, and unless the child is stopped he may destroy himself or someone else. Whether he is a child acting up at home or in school, a delinquent on the streets, or an adult writing a lot of bad checks or robbing banks, sooner or later someone will say, “Stop,” or “Go away,” or “We don’t give a damn,” and the behavior no longer works. When his behavior doesn’t work, especially if he is a criminal being locked up, or if not a criminal, he is being totally rejected, the pain starts again. If he is in prison, he ends up in smaller and smaller rooms until he is finally immobilized in a straitjacket. We may criticize the prison officials who lock him up but he truly may be uncontrollable; the pain drives him into this behavior because he believes only acting out will reduce his pain. When parents call me, desperate because of a totally out-of-control child, the only advice I can give them is to control him, which usually means employing juvenile corrections. Nothing else will work. If he can be controlled through probation or other legal means, then he may be able to be helped by a good probation officer or a therapist; but to be helped, first he must be stopped. Only then has he a chance to slow down and to think seriously about how poor his choice to act out is, how it locks him away from love and worth. Although there is no shortage of people who act out, most of us stop after childhood. We learn early from firm parents or teachers that tantrums won’t work for us. Our advisers may stop our acting out, but if they don’t help us to