

## I admit that I am powerless over my client's substance abuse addiction



with Galit Serebrenick-Hai, MA, MSW,  
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**My clients lie.** Friends, family, colleagues, strangers, themselves, no one is excluded from their liar's club, myself included. As the clinical director of an inpatient detox and rehabilitation center (addressing all forms of substance addiction), I was lied to by my clients so often I started to expect it. However, and this is even more important, I did accept it as a symptom of the disease called addiction.

**After five years at the center** I realized that dishonesty in general and manipulative behaviors in particular, especially when clients were still struggling with active addiction and frequent relapses, were not embedded in their personality or characteristics. Rather, they resulted from past experiences and how the addict viewed his/her problem and its solution. I believe that accepting such a point of view can help therapists improve their ability to handle their countertransference and enable them to remain compassionate even when confronted with their clients' dishonesty.

**“Addiction knows  
no mercy.”**



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**Dishonesty** and manipulative behaviors take on many forms. Therapists often discover that their clients have never really stopped using drugs/alcohol. If therapy occurs in an agency with mandatory screening for drug/alcohol abuse, addicts find various creative ways to forge the results. For example, some of my clients explained to me that while supposedly seeking help at outpatient clinics they were actually calculating the day and exact point in time that they needed to stop drinking in order to pass those screening tests. Drug addicts introduced me to various ways in which urine screening tests can also be forged.

**One may assume** that there must be less chance for dishonesty when treatment is held at an inpatient facility, which is initially an alcohol and drug free environment. While this is true to some extent, the magnitude of the false pretense that addicts are willing to live through is surprising. In

the detox and rehab facility where I worked clients were only able to leave the facility for the weekend after three months of extensive therapy. Very often, the choices they made during their weekend away (if they ever returned...) were the only indicator of their sincerity during those three months in which they nodded their heads in agreement during group therapy.

**Although clients** usually managed to refrain from the use of alcohol or drugs, more often than not they still indulged themselves in behaviors such as gambling, partying with friends who used drugs or alcohol, communicating with people with which they had abusive relationships, etc. These kinds of choices clearly indicated they were not taking the information given to them at the rehab seriously. Their chances to "stay clean and sober" in the long run were practically non-existent.

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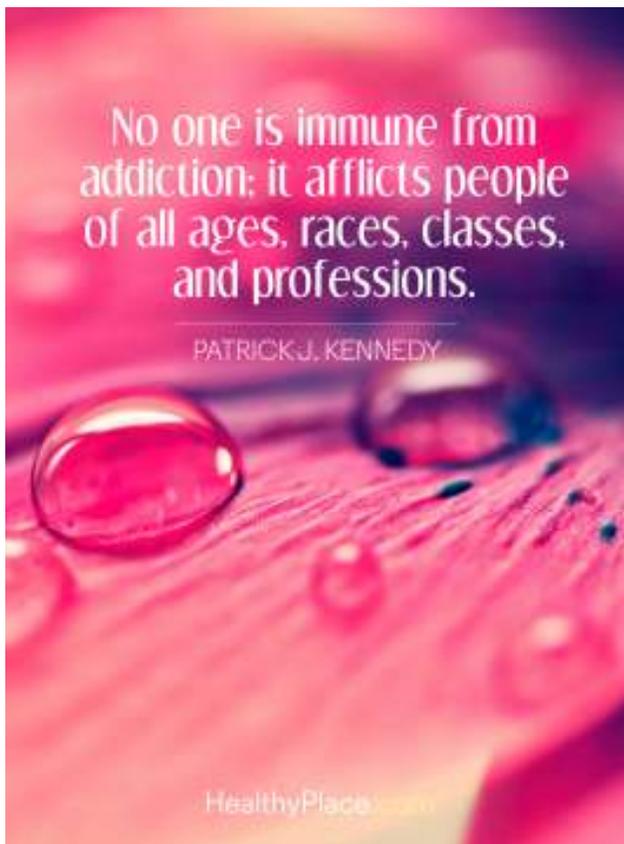


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**Dishonesty** can take other forms, too. I will never forget an incident in which one of my nicest clients, a 40-year-old woman who worked hard on resolving family issues and disclosed a few sexual assaults in her life, revealed after four months of treatment that she had secretly kept a small bottle of vodka, "just in case", in the suitcase she brought with her to the rehab center. Although she had no access to her suitcase during her stay at the facility, she could have easily manipulated her way to it. Only she knew of its existence before she chose to disclose that information to me, in effect taking her "just in case" bottle out of her hands and putting it in mine.

**It is important** to note that in my

experience there is no real difference in the tendency toward dishonest behavior between people who abuse drugs or alcohol and those who abuse prescription pills such as pain killers, sleeping pills, or mood stabilizers. The only difference is that the latter's substance abuse addiction might have begun later in life. For example, their first encounter with the drug may have been at the doctor's office following a medical procedure or short term emotional turmoil and a temporary intervention was prescribed. I have witnessed the same exact manipulative behavior with government officials, successful business people, doctors, teachers, etc. Addiction knows no mercy. Until addicts are ready for a major shift in their perception about their problem and are ready for changes in their lives, regardless of their background, they will do ANYTHING to protect their substance use from being taken away from them.

**I strongly advise** that addicts begin their search for their own path of recovery at an inpatient facility. This kind of environment is not only drug/alcohol free but is also free from other triggers that may lead a struggling addict to quick relapse. Compassionate therapists who rightfully acknowledge that addiction is rooted in trauma, abuse, and neglect, sometimes try to conduct therapy with clients who are still actively abusing drugs and/or alcohol in an attempt to help motivate them toward choosing a different way of living. It is important to understand that at that point in time, addicts' perceptions are so distorted by the chaos that addiction brought into

their lives and their feelings are so inaccessible by the substance abuse that unfortunately these therapists usually end up completely frustrated and join the ranks of those who are no longer willing to work with this population. They usually learn that during these sessions they should have kept a better watch on their wallet, too.

**A few years ago**, after being often puzzled by the roots of this manipulative and dishonest behavior, I asked the participants of a group I was facilitating, "Why do addicts lie so much?" One answer I received seemed to be very honest... A young client explained that addicts were so accustomed to lying and that after years of substance abuse, it simply became a habit. He also explained that when young people start abusing drugs or alcohol, usually as early as the beginning of their teen years, they view their newly acquired behavior as the best thing that has ever happened to them, the solution to their emotional and relational difficulties. They finally feel good and soon enough they simply love it. However, after a while, as the use of drugs or alcohol is no longer recreational, it starts to take its toll and certain areas in their lives such as school and relationships with their family members begin to fall apart. Very often at least ten years pass before they are ready to consider the possibility that they lost control over their drug and/or alcohol use and that it is actually destroying their lives. In the meantime, in order to protect their drug and/or alcohol abuse from any possible interference, they start lying. They constantly lie to their teachers, family

members, friends and later on, to their employers. This young man's explanation correlated with my professional experience. I realized that when addicts finally end up at their first detox and rehab facility, which is often the first in a chain of facilities and agencies they will encounter in the upcoming years as they try to struggle with their addiction, they have already been constantly lying throughout the years, to all who surround them. Therefore, lying is to be expected.

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PEOPLE ARE NOT ADDICTED  
TO ALCOHOL OR DRUGS,  
THEY ARE ADDICTED TO  
ESCAPING REALITY



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**In my humble opinion,** there is yet another major reason for addicts' dishonesty toward their actual goals. While one would assume that after all the suffering addicts have endured, they would look for ways to refrain from the use of drugs/alcohol, I reached the conclusion that, at this point in time, what they are really looking for is a way to control their use of the substance, not to stop it.

**Their deep desire** is to be able to use drugs and alcohol recreationally, in the way they were able to years ago, "like everyone else"; they are not easily discouraged despite being faced with consistent failure. More often than not, they are not ready to break-up with the drug 'who' has been their loyal friend for so long, always available and extremely successful in numbing both their physical and emotional pain. Despite the loss and chaos that addiction inevitably brought into their life, the extent of their denial is so immense that they do not easily surrender to the possibility that they are, in fact, suffering from addiction; that as a result, from now on, they should not only refrain from the use of any substance but also need to make additional changes such as to move to a new place, find new people to associate with, and attend NA/AA groups regularly to avoid possible triggers and create relationships with people rather than rely on substances (drugs/alcohol). Even if they acknowledge this information to be true, many addicts still try to substitute their drug of choice—marijuana instead of wine, beer instead of heroin—in hopes of controlling their use. Unfortunately, it

doesn't work with outcomes marred by bad choices and compromised judgment while under the influence. So how did I deal with the fact that I never knew whether my clients were sincere or just "playing with me"?

**As I started** working with this population, I decided to put my training as a social worker and psychodynamic psychotherapist aside and at least for the first few sessions to concentrate almost solely on somatic psychotherapy. My training as a [Somatic Experiencing®](#) Practitioner has enabled me to avoid the need to work with a questionable narrative and to concentrate on concrete goals through the use of specific exercises that were aimed, for example, toward restoring physical and emotional boundaries. This kind of somatic psychotherapy has also allowed me to

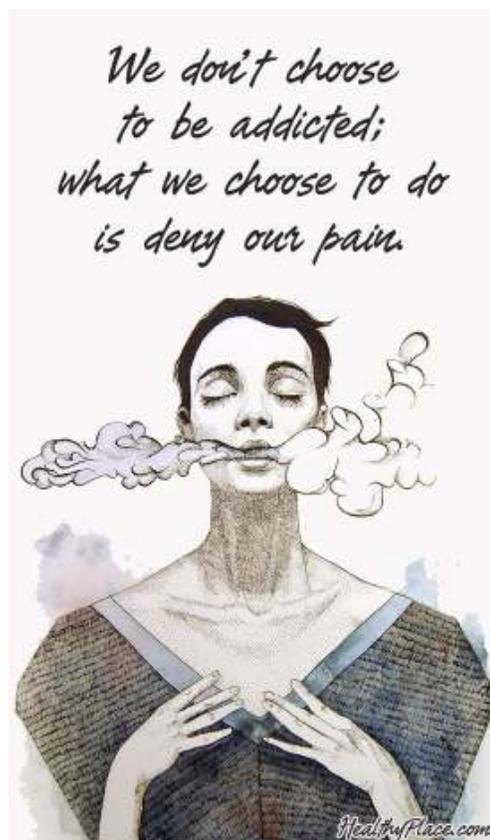


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## “Addiction is rooted in trauma, abuse and neglect. Addicts were not born this way.”

eliminate various physical symptoms that resulted from traumatic events, whether the client remembered the traumatic event or not (due to being in a state of intoxication at the time of the event) (see Serebrenick-Hai, 2015, 2016).

**Overall,** I believe that working with addicts has taught me about humility and reminded me of my own limitations. While my work with Somatic Experiencing® has enabled me to help my clients to successfully and rather quickly resolve physical symptoms and emotional issues and offered the possibility of a deep connection to their core self, I believe that its greatest advantage is that it enabled me to achieve specific and important goals even when it was very clear that the client was not ready yet for the major changes that recovery from active addiction requires. I knew that at least I managed to do something.

**This being said,** I wish to accentuate that we must remember that addiction is rooted in trauma, abuse and neglect. Addicts were not born this way.

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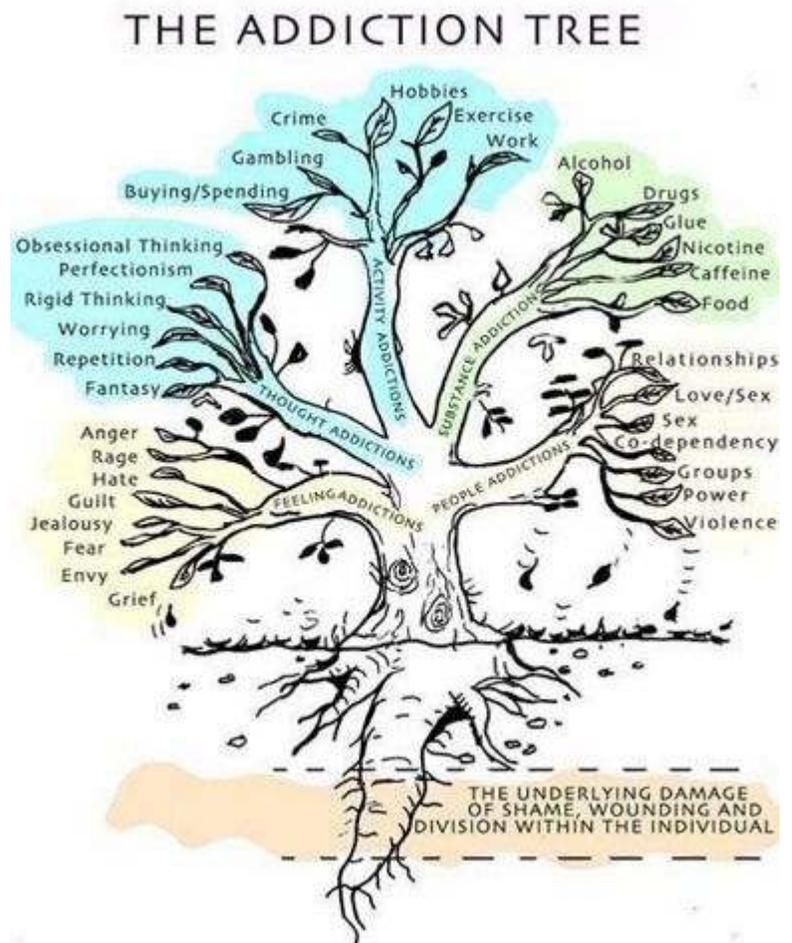


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