

Addiction, Substance Abuse, and Gambling

Unapproved draft, version: 12/4/2017

Friends,—Whatever ye are addicted to, the tempter will come in that thing; and when he can trouble you, then he gets advantage over you, and then ye are gone....Your strength is to stand still, after ye see yourselves; whatsoever ye see yourselves addicted to, temptations, corruption, uncleanness, &c. then ye think ye shall never overcome. And earthly reason will tell you, what ye shall lose; hearken not to that, but stand still in the light that shows them to you, and then strength comes from the Lord, and help contrary to your expectation. Then ye grow up in peace, and no trouble shall move you.

George Fox, 1652

Addiction presents one of the most difficult challenges in spiritual life. Whether to alcohol, gambling, sex (including pornography), or any of a myriad of other potentially addictive behaviors and substances, addiction always detracts from life, and in many cases is damaging in the extreme, both to the addicted individuals and to others around them. Once established, addiction usually cannot be overcome by sheer willpower. It is therefore essential to watch oneself carefully for the early signs of developing addiction, to be honest with oneself about them, and to seek help when necessary.

Meetings must bear in mind that some of their own members and attenders may be struggling with addiction. The meeting environment should be one of loving support and understanding, combined with a firm resolution not to enable the addictive behavior. Pastoral care committees should inform themselves about community resources for combatting addiction, and refer Friends when appropriate. Meeting activities should be organized in such a way as to avoid contributing to addiction or weakening the resolve of those who are trying to resist it.

Alcohol, tobacco, and substance abuse

Excessive alcohol use has been a concern of Friends since the beginnings of the Quaker movement. An early passage in George Fox's journal describes his discomfort at being asked to join drinking games as a teenager. Friends' concerns about alcohol gradually increased, and by the late nineteenth century, many meetings — including Illinois Yearly Meeting — advised total abstinence. This is no longer expected, but Friends continue to place a high value on clearness of mind. Friends are urged to be cautious in their use of alcohol, and watchful for any sign in themselves of immoderation or problematic drinking.

Friends do not generally serve alcohol at meeting events, and many meetings do not allow it on their property. This is especially important for people recovering from alcohol abuse. Meetings should be aware that people in recovery may turn to religious practice, both as a source of strength in maintaining that recovery and as a setting for social interaction and community away from alcohol.

Prescription pain medications and many other legal and illegal intoxicants present similar dangers to alcohol, and should be approached with similar watchfulness for signs of abuse.

The addictive nature of tobacco and its injurious effects on health — even at second hand — are now beyond dispute. Friends are urged to keep completely clear of all tobacco and recreational nicotine, and meetings are advised not to allow it on their property.

To those trapped in substance abuse, such advice [as to abstain from alcohol] may seem hollow. Commonalities exist between addictive behaviors with these substances and other compulsive actions such as in the areas of eating disorders, gambling, overwork and physical abuse. The causes go deep and may not be fully understood, but the resulting pain, fear, desperation and denial, damaging the abuser and all around that person, need to be supportively recognized. A meeting community should be ready to listen non-judgmentally, offer information about sources of help, refuse to enable people to continue in harmful patterns, and continue to offer an environment free from addictive practices.

Baltimore Yearly Meeting, 1988

Gambling

Gambling can easily become addictive to certain individuals, with highly destructive effects. Friends have long opposed all forms of gambling, not only because of its potentially addictive nature and ruinous consequences, but also because it involves a fundamental injustice. Other forms of economic activity, when properly executed, involve an equal exchange for all parties involved; but gambling always results in an imbalanced outcome: one person's gain comes at another's loss.

Friends are advised to keep clear of all gambling. This requires care and discernment, since some forms of gambling may not be easily recognized as such, and there are many unclear cases. Before making a financial investment, it is best to query oneself whether it would serve as a useful provision of capital, or mere speculation on later changes in value. Even small retail purchases sometimes come with automatic contest entries, as do charitable donations. It is best to attend carefully to any scruples one may feel regarding the use of money, especially when there appears to be a prospect of gain with nothing useful provided in exchange.

Meetings are urged not to use any form of gambling — even raffles or prize drawings — in order to raise funds.

Sources for quotes

p. 1: “Friends,—Whatever ye are addicted to...”: George Fox, Epistle 10, from *A Collection Of Many Select And Christian Epistles, Letters And Testimonies, Written On Sundry Occasions, By That Ancient, Eminent, Faithful Friend, And Minister Of Christ Jesus, George Fox*, in *Works of George Fox*, vol. 7, pp. 20–21. Marcus Gould, Philadelphia, 1831.

p. 1, “An early passage in George Fox’s journal describes ...”: *A Journal or Historical Account of The Life, Travels, Sufferings, Christian Experiences, and Labor of Love in the Work of the Ministry of that Ancient, Eminent and Faithful Servant of Jesus Christ, George Fox*, in *Works of George Fox*, vol. 1, pp. 68–69. Marcus Gould, Philadelphia, 1831.

p. 2, “To those trapped in substance abuse...”: *Faith and Practice*, Baltimore Yearly Meeting of Friends, p. xx, 1988.