

We Are Not 'Addicted' to Phones and Fossil Fuels – But Here's Why It's Hard to Give Them Up

Smartphones, meat and fossil fuels are not addictions – but understanding the similarities is vital for the future of the planet, an addiction expert argues.

NEW YORK, USA, July 29, 2024 /EINPresswire.com/ -- Smartphones, meat and fossil fuels are not addictions – but understanding the similarities is vital for the future of the planet, an addiction expert argues.

Inspired by his own experience with attempting to sustain a vegetarian diet and his extensive research career in studying addictions, Professor of Developmental Psychopathology Reinout Wiers wanted to understand why more people do not reduce their meat consumption for climate change.

After carrying out extensive studies of the latest research in neuroscience, biology, medicine, psychology and philosophy, Wiers suggests it not possible to conclude that people can be addicted to meat – even if the reward centres in the brain react strongly to it.

In his latest book, [A New Approach to Addiction and Choice](#), Wiers looks at behaviours including meat cravings and compulsive smartphone use and compares them to addiction, to see where there are similarities and crucial differences, and how to influence these choices for the benefit of the planet.

In the last decade of the 20th century, addiction was defined as a chronic brain disease and much research went into unraveling this disease and its underlying genetic and neurobiological mechanisms.

However, more recently this definition has been questioned by experts across all fields. Although research does show that the brain does indeed change under the influence of addictive substances, and even more broadly under the influence of all rewarding and repeated activities, these changes in the brain by themselves do not tell us much.

“The short summary is that the evidence is much weaker than often assumed: yes, there are changes in the brain when someone gets addicted, but most people overcome their addiction with little or no professional help and at least some of the brain changes related to addiction can

recover," Wiers explains.

Wiers suggests that there is only a small group of severely addicted people, for whom full recovery is beyond their reach, who could be considered to have a chronic brain disease.

"But for the vast majority of people meeting criteria of 'substance-related and addictive disorders' (the current name for addictions in the psychiatric classification system the DSM5), the notion of a chronic brain disease appears to be neither accurate nor helpful," he adds.

Wiers instead argues that a complete loss of free will, defined as our ability to foresee the consequences of our actions, is rare. Instead of a chronic brain disease, Wiers argues that addiction is a biased choice – and this is important when considering how to change long-term habits.

Considering addiction not as a disease but as biased choice, Wiers suggests that addictive behaviors involving smartphones and fossil fuels can be changed.

"Our learning history and our genetic makeup influence future choices, because that is what our brain is constantly doing," he explains. "When we learn that something gives us a high, this will influence our future choice, but that does not imply it is no longer a choice."

Given that research has shown even severely addicted people can often choose to not take a substance when there is an attractive alternative, Wiers argues that behaviors that are negatively impacting the planet can also be changed if there are suitable alternatives that are more in line with the long-term goal to contribute to a sustainable future.

"This does not mean that it is easy for an addicted person to forego their addictive behavior, nor is it for the frequent flyer or meat consumer: their decision-making system has become strongly biased toward repetition of the addictive behavior," he explains. "But this can be changed, in most cases."

The key to moving away from addictive behaviors is motivation, but when it comes to our everyday life choices that impact our broader future, including that of our offspring, the planet and mankind, Wiers says the same is important but at least as difficult.

While our internal systems have been evolutionarily developed to predict consequences of our actions, this system developed to promote our own chances of survival and that of our offspring, not that of the planet. So how can we be sufficiently motivated to move towards a collective goal?

"We need to change our behavior, much like the addicted person, and drastically reduce meat and carbon fuel consumption, which is as difficult, because imagining future consequences of our behavior for our own distant future is already hard, let alone for the planet's health. And

then we pass the butcher where the scent of roasted chicken is calling us... Therefore, it is crucial that these necessary changes are not only dependent on the individual, but are supported by policy," he explains.

Wiers argues that while considering future consequences of our behavior is key to changing our brain wiring, policies should also support individual decision-making without steering people back into addictive behavior.

"There is an important resemblance between addicted people and the rest of us: we have to change our behavior for our own future (addiction) and that of the planet (all of us), which is difficult given our biased decision making and corporate influences steering us back to the addictive behavior (whether that concerns the alcohol, smoking or gambling industry or big oil)," he concludes.

Further Information

A New Approach to Addiction and Choice: Akrasia and the Nature of Free Will, by Reinout W. Wiers (Routledge, 2024)

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