

Escapism

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Author's note:

Escapism is something I value very highly in my life. Ever since I was very young I have been drawn to escape. It has always played a huge role in helping me navigate my internal world and has helped me develop and grow as a person. Escape is how I cope with the struggles that everyday life presents. However, as I have gotten older new and much more damaging forms of escape have presented themselves to me, forcing me to choose between new and old methods of escapism. Navigating my increasingly complex daily life and making decisions about how I choose to manage my emotions has left me asking the question: how can one escape and stay healthy? Is there a middle ground to escapism?

In my essay, I attempt to answer this question through research. In the first section, I discuss the definition of escape and why it is an essential psychological mechanism for coping with emotions. I define the difference between negative and positive coping escapist behaviors in an effort to paint a clearer picture about the function of escape. I go on to focus on unhealthy coping mechanisms gone wrong, explaining where addiction comes from and how it is such a powerful disease. Then I offer a discussion, musing on who gets addicted, why and how addiction can be prevented in the future.

ESCAPISM

What is escapism? Even looking at the dictionary definition, it is hard to get a straight answer. The Merriam Webster dictionary defines escapism as "habitual diversion of the mind." Random House defines it as "the avoidance of reality." The World Dictionary states escapism is "an inclination to or habit of retreating from unpleasant or unacceptable reality." So which is it? Is it diversion, avoidance, an inclination, or a habit? These are all very different concepts.

Escapism is often seen as a dangerous vice that rules people's lives, an unhealthy way of removing oneself from real life and not dealing with problems. Escapism certainly can be these things, but it has a much larger and complex definition than this. It can be healthy, unhealthy and neutral. In the most general definition, escapism is exactly what it sounds like: escape. It is anything one does to distract, forget, or take a breather from real life. This sort of removal is often found in physical, emotional, or mental transportation to another realm of state of being. Escape can be found in a range of places and modes of action. These modes of escape fall into two categories: healthy escapism and unhealthy escapism. The only differences between these two groups are the physical, mental, or emotional impact of the activity in the long term. Healthy escapism includes working, daydreaming, travel, reading, art, hobbies, meditation, exercise, really anything that distracts oneself from life or lets the mind expand into a new realm. These sorts of activities are beneficial coping and relaxation methods that improve well being in the long term. Unhealthy escapism includes behaviors like excessive drug use, sex, self harm, isolation, suicidal isolation, and the blurring of the lines between fantasy and reality (Huljich). These things are not inherently or always unhealthy, but more often than not, these

activities lead to emotional and physical harm, dependence, and in extreme conditions, addiction. These are often referred to as negative coping mechanisms in psychological practice.

Why escape? Everyone does it to varying levels- playing a game on a phone, surfing the web, daydreaming-these are more commonplace and less extreme versions of escapism that almost everyone participates in. In fact, psychologists and neurologists estimate we spend 15- 50 % of our waking hours daydreaming (Glausiusz). Even people with incredible lives still need to get away. If everyone uses escape to some extent, it must perform some vital psychological role. Escape is important for a number of reasons. One way people use escape is for pleasure. There is something inherently satisfying about experiencing a new realm of existence, be it emotional, mental, or physical. Creating or exploring an alternate reality is something many people find incredibly fulfilling. This "other world" of experience can serve as a wonderful way to spend time, and can often bring people together to bond over a shared passion.

Other than for pleasure the main reason people use escape is to deal with stress and emotional issues. Escape provides a refuge, either a safe space to deal with emotions, or a space to distract from or numb varying degrees of emotional pain/stress ("how do you cope?"). The escapist activities that provide numbing or distraction are the ones that often develop into negative coping skills, such as drug abuse and self harm. This is because the positive effects of activities like this are only temporary, meaning they only push away negative emotions instead of dealing with them. These sorts of behaviors beget more of the same behavior, creating reliance. Escapist activities that provide a place to deal with and process emotions are generally the sorts of behaviors that are considered healthy, such as reading, travel, and hobbies. Using escapism in this way helps the individual de-stress and provides a reprieve from daily life in a constructive way. It allows the individual to have a space that comforts them in times of distress and allows enough of a removal from real life issues so one can examine it with emotional distance. A friend of mine who goes on very long walks in the woods reports that he "feels more in control" of his environment when he is outdoors. The complete control of an environment that escapism offers is something that is rare in real life and can be used as an incredibly powerful tool for emotional growth. Escape in this way is a particularly effective technique to deal with emotions because it provides a safe space to act out feelings that may be dangerous or scary to act upon in real life. Processing like this is important because it refreshes the mind and prepares oneself to tackle more difficult tasks in the future.

ADDICTION: COPING MECHANISMS GONE WRONG

So what happens when people rely too heavily on one coping mechanism? In excess, many coping methods that were positive to begin with, like watching television or exercising, can develop into an emotional dependence. This means the individual uses the activity in place of self reflection and healthy self-soothing in response to stress. If left unchecked, especially when one is using drugs as a coping mechanism, dependence can turn into addiction.

Addiction is a complex and multilayered mechanism that arises from many sources. People can have addictions to many things, including but not limited to: drugs, sex, gambling, eating/not eating, self-harm, suicidal ideation, porn, television, the Internet, videogames, work, and exercise. All addictions start with experiencing pleasure or elevated mood (Giddens).The pleasure that one feels when they engage in behaviors with the potential for addiction—drugs,

sex, gambling—provides a release from anxiety and sadness, as well as a source of distraction from real life and risk that many people crave. Such behaviors are an attractive and simple fix to make one feel better in the short term. The initial gratification and emotional mitigation power of these activities leads the individual to actively seek out more experiences of a similar type. This ultimately results in chemical and psychological dependence on either drugs or behavior.

Why are addictions so powerful? Addictions are fast to form, affect a wide range of people, and can be incredibly difficult to get rid of once ingrained. One of the main reasons addictions are so powerful is because of chemical interactions. By releasing dopamine, addictive substances and behaviors stimulate the reward circuit in your brain, the area of your brain that responds to natural rewards and determines motivation and drive ("Brain Reward Pathways"). Continual exposure to addictive substances or behavior causes a connection to be formed in the brain that confuses liking something with wanting it ("understanding addiction"). This motivates us to take action and begin continually seeking out the source of pleasure. After a while of addictive behavior, the dopamine receptors in the reward pathway begin to shut down. This is because the constant flood of dopamine from the addictive behavior overwhelms these receptors, tricking the brain into thinking it is getting more than enough dopamine (Clark). This creates a problem when the person is not engaging in the addictive behavior, because they need constant dopamine flooding in order to maintain normal brain function. When they are not on the drug, they have a dearth of dopamine in their brains that leads the body to crave things that will produce dopamine ("understanding addiction"). Thus, the cycle of addiction is perpetuated.

Chemicals alone do not explain the strength of addictions, though. Addictions get stuck because of chemicals, and then linger because of conditioned learning. The chemicals that are released because of addictive drugs and behaviors act very similarly to the normal process of learning and memory. (Hyman) This means that after a while of abusing addictive substances, the reward one gets from the activity becomes not only chemically needed, but also behaviorally motivated ("The addicted brain"). The addict has "learned" to engage with the addictive substance. Once established, behaviors with rewarding goals like drug use and gambling tend to persist in memory much more strongly than other actions (Hyman). The addictive behavior becomes ingrained in the mind, and even if the addict knows that what they are doing is unhealthy, they are unable to override the behavioral pathway that has been established in their brain. This leads to feelings of guilt and shame surrounding the addiction, leading to even more use of the addictive behavior to negate the bad feelings.

The immense chemical, behavioral and emotional power of addictions lends one to wonder: Why isn't everyone addicted? There are several factors that contribute to the likelihood of addiction. First and most simple: not everyone likes drugs or addictive behaviors. People who don't like alcohol aren't going to get addicted to it, because they don't like drinking. If you don't have access to/ don't like something, you're simply not going to get addicted to it. Another huge risk factor for addictions is genetics. It has been shown that people with parents who are addicts are eight times more likely to develop addictions than those whose parents are not addicts (Melemis). The presence of certain genes can determine predisposition to addiction; heritability can be anywhere from 45 to 79% within families (Dick, Agrawal). This means that some people are much more prone to addiction than others because of their actual genetic makeup. Another huge factor for likelihood of addiction is having a mental illness. The facts surrounding addiction and mental illness are staggering; 72% of individuals who struggle with drug abuse have at least one co-occurring psychiatric disorder ("Co morbidity with substance abuse"). The co-occurrence of bipolar and substance addiction is 56%, compared to the 10% occurrence of substance abuse

in the general population ("Bipolar Disorder and Addiction"; "Mental Illness: the challenge of dual diagnosis"). The prevalence of addiction amongst people with any mental illness is much higher than that of the general population ("Mental Illness: the challenge of dual diagnosis"). That sort of probability is more than chance. The list of facts surrounding mental illness and addiction goes on; the most important conclusion to draw from it is that they are intrinsically connected.

From this list of facts it seems like some are doomed to addiction from the start. But such a deterministic fate must be alterable in some measure. I refuse to believe that some people will become addicts because of their circumstances. There must be tools in the world for overcoming addiction and ways for people who are in places of emotional turmoil and stress to healthily cope with their situation. I want to think some people have a chance against the odds that face them in their lives. And, in the end, none of the risk factors for addiction ensure that someone is going to be an addict. Just because a teenage girl is a ballerina doesn't ensure she is going to develop an eating disorder. People are quick to label those in high risk situations. There is an automatic assumption placed on the poor and mentally ill and genetically liable that they are going to get addicted. And of course, while it is more likely, it is like that because there are a lot less resources available to those in difficult situations like these. I feel like society has a responsibility to people in high risk situations to prevent them from becoming addicts. There are so few resources available to people in these sorts of conditions. I think the first step towards rectifying the lack of resources is spreading knowledge. If the school system or public health system would talk about the increased genetic/inheritable risk for addiction more thoroughly and to a wider range of addiction, I am sure that rates of addictions would be curbed. Identifying people at high risk of addiction and providing them with resources about healthy coping methods and addiction prevention strategies available to people before they embark on a road to addiction is key in this type of situation. I know plenty of people who have parents who are addicts but have stayed away from drugs and alcohol because they were informed about their heightened risk of addiction. This has enabled them to live a safer, more fulfilling life. If this sort of information was available to people everywhere, the world would be a nicer, more addiction free place.

ON FINDING A BALANCE

I have always needed to escape. It is the only way I know how to handle my emotions. As my life has gotten more complicated, I have started to require more ways to escape in order to deal with mounting emotional pressures and stress. It has become increasingly difficult to manage my everyday life with the limited amount of ways I have to escape. My need to escape has started me on a journey to discover more methods of escapism than the faculties I had before. I have been searching for a very long time and I have found a few methods of escape that help me relieve stress effectively. The unfortunate thing is that the activities that work best for me—hiking, trail building and camping—are only occasionally accessible to me. If I wanted these activities to be my main method of escapism in the future I would have to devote my life to them, which is a more extreme lifestyle change than I am willing to make at the moment. This makes me wonder, how can I find a balance between escapism and living real life? From looking at addiction statistics and the experiences of those around me, it seems other people are trying to

answer this question too. Other people need to escape as desperately as I do, but can't seem to find a way that does not take over their life in a negative way. Finding escape will be a lifelong endeavor for us. I know it's not certain, but I like to trust in the idea that I will find something that makes me feel whole and that I can balance with the rest of my life.

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