

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

William Glasser, M.D.



PERENNIAL LIBRARY



Harper & Row, Publishers

New York, Cambridge, Philadelphia, San Francisco
London, Mexico City, São Paulo, Singapore, Sydney

A hardcover edition of this book was published by Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc.

POSITIVE ADDICTION. Copyright © 1976 by William Glasser, Inc., Joseph P. Glasser, Alice J. Glasser, and Martin H. Glasser. All rights reserved. Printed in the United States of America. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. For information address Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc., 10 East 53rd Street, New York, N.Y. 10022. Published simultaneously in Canada by Fitzhenry & Whiteside Limited, Toronto.

First HARPER COLOPHON edition published 1985.

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Glasser, William, 1925—

Positive addiction.

(Harper colophon books ; CN 1249)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Self-actualization (Psychology) 2. Running—

Psychological aspects. 3. Transcendental Meditation.

I. Title.

[BF637.S4G55 1985] 158'.1 84-48643

ISBN 0-06-091249-9 (pbk.)

POSITIVE ADDICTION

ALSO BY THE AUTHOR

The Identity Society

Mental Health or Mental Illness?

Reality Therapy

Schools Without Failure

Stations of the Mind

Take Effective Control of Your Life

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

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank George Shuba for his willingness to discuss his possible positive addiction to swinging a bat. Thanks also to Ed Ford and Al Katz, two of my associates who sent me supporting material which helped me a great deal in developing the concept. I also appreciate the contribution of Robert Winquist, a vice-president of Mahareshi International University in Fairfield, Iowa, who devoted a great deal of time to exploring the ideas at several stages along the way. A special thanks to Joe Henderson, an addicted runner who edits *Runner's World*, whose cooperation provided me with essential material in Chapter Five. Thanks also to Steve Weggeland, who tabulated the several thousand questionnaires summarized in chapters Five and Six.

When the initial manuscript was finished, my wife, Naomi, spent a great deal of time reading it over and making a series of suggestions all of which made this a much better book. As usual, Hal Grove, my editor at Harper & Row, provided encouragement and help from start to finish.

contents

Acknowledgments	xi
ONE	
Strength—When You Have It and When You Don't	1
TWO	
Positive Addiction—How Anyone, Weak or Strong, Can Gain Strength	37
THREE	
The Psychology of Strength and Weakness	62
FOUR	
The Six Steps to a Positive Addiction	92
FIVE	
Running—The Hardest But Surest Way	100
SIX	
Meditation—The Most Popular Way	124
SEVEN	
Positive Addiction in Your Life	140
Index	153

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

Positive Addiction

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

Positive Addiction

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 mar-

riages, 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,

Positive Addiction

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

Strength—When You Have It And When You Don't

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

Positive Addiction

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.