

CAROL CANNON

MA, CADC

Hooked *on* Unhappiness

*Breaking the cycle
of discontent*



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Introduction

The minute Pam wakes up in the morning, she catalogs her aches and pains so she will be ready to offer a detailed description to the first person she meets. At breakfast, she responds to her teenage son's friendly "Whazzup?" with a groan. She didn't sleep well. She's exhausted, and the pain in her shoulder is worse. While eating her Cheerios, Pam obsesses about her to-do list. An unresolved problem assails her and attaches itself to the amorphous mass already rolling around in her head. Her face takes on a worried expression. As if on cue, her husband asks what's wrong. She launches into a litany of her woes. When she looks up, he has disappeared.

Do you know any good, kind, moral people who seem to suffer the tortures of the damned? They take pride in being poor in spirit. They seem to relish being persecuted for righteousness' sake. The Bible says there's a time for everything—happiness, joy, pain, and sorrow. But for these unhappy souls, the cloud of gloom never lifts. They can't escape the slough of despond, no matter how hard they try. They can't *not* be miserable.

Some try to dispel their negative feelings by analyzing them. Others attempt to counteract their pessimism with positive affirmations. Those who think God requires His followers to be hap, hap, happy all the time memorize Scripture or pray unceasingly to ward off the demons of discouragement. If that doesn't work, they feel guilty and get even more depressed.

If you or anyone you love fits this description, I have good news—intractable misery is not a failure of faith. Nor is it a sign of weakness or perversity. And it definitely is not your fault. If you suffer (and I do mean *suffer*) from chronic misery and unhappiness, there's hope. Negaholism is treatable. If you've spent your whole life struggling with gloom, doom, and despair, you've got nothing to lose and a lot to gain by reading on.

Ask yourself the following questions to see if you are a certifiable negaholic: Do you find yourself in a bad mood more often than not? Are you critical of everyone and everything around you? Do you dwell on painful memories? Do you have a negative perspective of global proportions? When someone says, "Good morning," do you think, *What's good about it?*¹

If complaining is your favorite pastime, if you have turned venting and lamenting into an art form, this book is for you. It is possible to break the chronic misery habit.

I couldn't help noticing, while I was growing up in the shadow of numerous religious institutions, that churches are often hotbeds of misery addiction and undue self-sacrifice (martyring). Frankly, I don't believe churches have an exclusive claim on the misery and martyr syndrome. Misery addiction is a disease—a miasma of unhealthy attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors that has infiltrated our whole society from the beauty salon to the boardroom, from the supermarket to the sports arena. We all love to criticize, complain, and anticipate disaster. God save us from our self-pity!

Note to religious-oriented readers: while I consider myself to be a conservative Christian, I have chosen not to make this book an occasion for moralizing or a pulpit from which to preach my personal religious convictions. Along with my religious beliefs, I am gratefully steeped in the traditions of twelve-step programs, which are deeply spiritual but which suggest that "we have no opinion on outside issues." Religion may be a part of spirituality, but it is not synonymous with it.

A word of thanks to my peers in recovery, my sponsor, and my colleagues—past and present—at The Bridge to Recovery. Special gratitude to Nancy Green, my personal assistant, and to Paul, my eternally optimistic partner.

1. Sheri and Bob Stritof, "Is Negativity Hurting Your Marriage?" About.com: Marriage, <http://marriage.about.com/cs/communicationkeys/a/negativity.htm>.



CHAPTER I

Confessions of a Workaholic Worrywart

*I guess I just prefer to see the dark side of things. The glass is always half empty.
And cracked. And I just cut my lip on it. And chipped a tooth.*

— Janeane Garofalo

Some time ago, an omnicheerful friend informed me that I was the most pessimistic person she had ever met. Excuse me? You mean it's not normal to look at life through grim-tinted glasses? I thought I was just being realistic! My family and friends (a bunch of cockeyed optimists) were aware of my negativism. The mailman and newspaper carrier probably noticed it too, but *I* didn't see how negatively oriented I was, nor did I consider my attitude to be unhealthy. I was the last person in my world to recognize that I was hooked on unhappiness.

My attention and energy were drawn to crises and chaos, tragedy and trauma, as surely as a moth is drawn to the flame. I couldn't imagine how everyone around me could be so oblivious to the harsh realities of life. The sky was falling, the earth was crumbling beneath us, and waves were rolling over us. Why wasn't anyone else concerned?

Whoever was in charge around there obviously needed a personal assistant, but I didn't see anyone standing in line to apply for the job. Well, *I* was willing to oblige. (How's *that* for grandiosity?) I appointed myself adjutant to the Almighty and set about trying to rescue and repair everyone

and everything I considered problematic. While trying to arrange the universe to *my* satisfaction, thinking it was synonymous with *God's*, I overlooked the obvious: *I* was the one who was out of control. *I* was the one who was crazy—as in “Local Nutcase Tries to Save the World”!

Hooked on unhappiness

In my compulsive efforts to manage the universe, *my* life became unmanageable. I worried incessantly about all the pain and suffering around me. Worrying gave me an illusion of control. It allowed me to manage people and circumstances within the confines of my mind.

My constant obsessing created enormous anxiety, which demanded more worrying, which generated even greater anxiety. If I wasn't alarmed or upset about something, I thought I was out of touch with reality! I was like a nervous puppy chasing her tail. Worrying became an endless loop. I tied myself in proverbial knots.

Mulling over worst-case scenarios put me in fight-or-flight mode, stimulating an adrenaline rush. I might as well have been getting high on amphetamines. When the flood of adrenaline drained away, I was left exhausted and depressed like Elijah after his enervating experience on Mount Carmel.¹

Eventually, my endocrine system got stuck in high gear. I couldn't “let go and let God.” Convinced that He needed my help, I worked twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week.² The crash that followed my worry-and-work binges was like the withdrawal syndrome drug addicts go through when the high wears off. I was in a state of adrenaline depletion. To get rid of the unpleasant hangover, I simply shifted into hyper-drive and launched into another project. Full speed ahead!

In order to maintain a consistent supply of adrenaline, I added care-taking to my repertoire. Rescuing people allowed me to work harder, worry longer, and manage better. It was a toxic combination. I progressed from (1) seeing the bleak side of every situation, to (2) worrying about the disastrous consequences of failing to fix everything that was broken and quite a few things that *weren't* broken, to (3) begging God for miracles, to (4) working myself half to death trying to answer my own prayers. This cycle gave me a sense of purpose. Perhaps I took the Busy Bee program in Pathfinder Club a little too seriously.

Eye-popping anxiety haunted my every waking moment and most of my sleeping moments too. When I succeeded in conquering a given challenge, thus momentarily removing the *cause* of my worries, I found temporary relief. Seconds later, another crisis would come along, and I would go crazy trying to fix *it* or rescue *them*.

Can you identify with this description? I like to think I'm not alone in my insanity. Focusing on other people's problems helped me avoid my own fears. The changes in brain chemistry that took place when I was in the groove were autointoxicating. Who needs a dealer? I manufactured my own stimulants, thank you very much.

There's every probability that I had a neurological problem that I was unaware of—a biochemical deficit for which I was unconsciously compensating. John Ratey, clinical professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School, believes that addictive behavior is associated with a faulty novelty and reward system that he has dubbed the *reward deficiency syndrome*.³ Apparently, I had that problem before it had a name! When drug abusers tax their systems with alcohol, marijuana, cocaine, and heroin, they are messing up the communications between the neurons in their brains. When I taxed my system with stimulating activities and processes, I was messing up the communications between the neurons in my brain in a similar fashion. Me—a drug addict! Who knew?

Childhood days

Did I become an adrenaline junkie all by myself? Was it my idea to turn my life into a sacrificial statement? Did I invent my addiction to misery? Actually, I think my paternal grandfather provided the dominant gene. Grandpa has an alarmist personality which contributed to my being physiologically and psychologically vulnerable from birth or before. According to author John Powell, “the process of osmosis by which children absorb their parents’ vision of reality actually begins with intra-uterine or prenatal influences.”⁴ Apparently, a misery addict’s predisposition to negativity is born before she or he is!

My mother, a red-white-and-blue-blooded American girl, was pregnant with me when Pearl Harbor was attacked in 1941. That event must have jarred her the way 9/11 shocked us. The hyper-amygdaloid storms in her brain affected my fetal environment. (The arousal of the amygdala

is related to feelings of stress and anxiety.) Mom's elevated stress hormones coursed through my body, which may have set me up to be an anxious child. If so, I wasn't alone.

One wonders how many children born today are affected biochemically by terrorism, tsunamis, and other tragedies. There's no doubt in my mind that I was hardwired to be a nervous, anxious, negative person. An article in the *New York Times* (November 1996) validated this. Citing a study reported in the prestigious journal *Science*, it linked a specific gene to people who are neurologically more vulnerable to stressful life events than others.⁵

Sensitive to the physical and emotional threats in my universe, I toddled around in a state of irrepressible uneasiness. It was like growing up in the war zone of an alcoholic family—a place where children live in constant fear of what may happen next.

The 1950s were not “happy days” for me. While in elementary school, I was exposed to daily news broadcasts about the Korean conflict. Fascinated with Bible prophecy, my grandfather insisted that the undeclared nonwar was a fulfillment of scriptural warnings regarding wars and rumors of wars, which meant that the second advent of Christ was imminent. We had to prepare for the coming of the Lord, lest we be destroyed in the lake of fire that was going to consume the wicked when Jesus came. So you'd better be good, little girl. If God doesn't get you, Santa Claus will.

Grandpa's fire-and-brimstone preaching scared me as much as the war did. Many children reared in religious homes are exposed to similar beliefs. I may have been more sensitive than the average kid—I don't know. I just know that I lived in a state of unrelenting terror. Today, my heart goes out to children who are exposed prematurely to church doctrines that generate overwhelming fear. Recently I asked my husband, a pastoral counselor, at what age he thought children should be taught end-time theology. “When they're about twenty-five,” he replied.

As an adolescent, I wouldn't even have *considered* using our national sedative, alcohol, to relieve my fears. I had been told that drinking was a sin punishable by death. If you drink, you do not pass *GO*, you do not collect \$200, you go straight to the lake of fire or hell or purgatory or are left standing alone in a field while everyone else is raptured (depending on which prophetic interpretation your church of choice embraces).

I had to find a way to anesthetize my feelings—one that God would not frown upon. So I set out to find a way to improve my emotional ecology without incurring His or Dad’s wrath. In terms of psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg’s classic stages of moral development, I was right on schedule.⁶ Preadolescent that I was, I wasn’t morally mature enough to seek God. I was interested only in avoiding the lake of fire and the tribulation that preceded it.

Perhaps if I tried to be perfect, if I could figure out how to earn both Dad’s and God’s approval, I would stand a better chance of making it out alive. Aha! Maybe I could become so indispensable to God that He would *have* to spare me. This survival scheme was not a random choice. It was, in fact, very creative. Both heredity and environment dictated my decision.

Not only was I terrified of the future—the present was pretty daunting too. My dad was financially stressed, and my mom was clinically depressed. On a mood scale of 1 to 10, Mom registered somewhere between -2 and +1. Her emotional state became my reference point for normal. She modeled negativity to me, and I was genetically predisposed to it as well.

I distinctly remember feeling maligned and misunderstood by the age of ten. By the time I hit junior high school, I had adopted a persistently pessimistic outlook on life. I was not the bundle of optimism, enthusiasm, and energy that teenagers are meant to be.

Trying to win approval

Because I thought it was my duty to make Mom and Dad happy, I began to overachieve, overwork, and overdo everything. I evolved, rather ungraciously, into a full-blown workaholic and a world-class “worksaholic” (legalist), straining myself to gain the approval and acceptance of both God and man. *I was driven to justify my existence in the here and now and to earn my eternal salvation as well.* Does that sound like a normal adolescent to you?

I recall the first time I received a compliment for doing a kind deed. My freshman year in high school, I gave a couple of items from my own meager wardrobe to a needy classmate. As far as I know, my motive was unselfish, but when I was commended publicly for my kind act, I was instantly hooked on adulation. Here was the affirmation I had been looking for all my life. The needy little puppy dog started to wag her tail.

From then on, I was willing to do almost anything to earn accolades. I systematically sacrificed myself to win approval, carrying altruism to such an extreme that I nearly destroyed myself, figuratively, if not literally. I *may* have come close to killing my “caregivees” with kindness too. Being helpful boosted my ego. It shored up my sagging self-esteem. I deluded myself into thinking that I was just unselfish by nature.

If I could have seen myself as others saw me, I might have questioned my motives. I sighed frequently and loudly and complained to anyone who would listen. Gradually, I perfected my “poor me” persona. Moaning and groaning, whining and complaining are the martyr’s way of leaking anger out obliquely and siphoning attention from unsuspecting sympathizers. I considered myself a victim, but I wasn’t. I was a *volunteer*!

In *Codependents’ Guide to the Twelve Steps*, Melody Beattie describes how negativism affected her intimate relationships: “I had little to offer friends, except my perpetual complaints about the misery of my life. Most of my friendships centered around shared stories of victimization. [I call this *bonding by martyring*.]”

“I had no feelings that I was aware of . . . no needs that I was aware of. I prided myself in my ability to endure needless suffering, deprive myself, and go without.”⁷

Beattie’s modus operandi was mine too. I caught myself thinking that God had singled me out to carry a heavier-than-average burden because He knew I could handle it. When I finally woke up and smelled my superior attitude, I was mortified.

Workaholism, caretaking, and control became a self-perpetuating cycle. By the age of forty-five, I was toast—burned out from overwork and overworry. I knew I had to change. I tried to tear myself away from my obsessive-compulsive behavior. But I couldn’t. At first, I didn’t realize what that indicated. I was a certified alcohol and drug counselor by then, *and I didn’t recognize my own behavior as addictive*. Talk about delusion and denial!

Admitting defeat

The truth was that I had a martyr monkey on my back. Actually, it was a giant gorilla—King Kong with a shave, as one charismatic preacher used to say. Wake up and smell the Postum, little Miss! You are spiritually bankrupt and seriously in need of treatment services yourself!

That was twenty years ago. I'd like to report that I called a therapist immediately and made an appointment, but I didn't. I wasn't *that* healthy. Instead, I spent several months in a futile effort to fix myself. After all, I'm a treatment professional. I *should* be able to cure myself. Wrong! An avid churchgoer, I also presumed that if I had enough faith, God would heal me instantly. I didn't want to waste my time and *His* money on therapy (a little manipulation there), so I prayed harder instead.

Meanwhile, because I was oriented to salvation by works, I read every self-help book on the market. Alas, I couldn't put their suggestions into practice. Terry Kellogg, author and counselor, says that knowledge only makes an addict a more informed prisoner. No kidding! I couldn't translate good ideas into new behavior because I had not yet experienced adequate pain or a sense of personal powerlessness. I hadn't run out of track. I hadn't yet experienced enough discomfort to render me humble, teachable. My home study recovery plan was a complete bust.

The more I tried to control my behavior, the more I lost control. *Puff, puff. Chug, chug.* I was the little engine that couldn't. Months later, finally defeated, I admitted myself to a hospital-based treatment program for addiction and codependence—the broad diagnostic category within which compulsive caretaking, control, martyring, and other “clean” addictions fall. My best thinking, believing, and behaving got me there.

A workaholic worrywart, compulsive caretaker, and magnanimous martyr, I had no idea how to arrest the addictions I had denied for so long. I had to admit defeat. I didn't realize it then, but this was my first step toward recovery.

Negaholism undermined my character, sabotaged valued relationships, and subverted my spirituality, just as alcoholism does. The damage that clean addictions inflicted on my body and soul was identical to the damage that chemical dependence inflicts on alcoholics and drug addicts. I ended up in a treatment center full of alcoholics, because, like them, I was suffering from a deadly illness. My problem was bigger than I was, bigger than all the resources I could muster from within myself. I had a primary, chronic, progressive, fatal illness that I couldn't cure on my own. I could not arrest my out-of-control behavior, and I could not manage the consequences.

Recovery is a process

Where my attempts to gain knowledge and insight failed to fix me, the spiritual program of Alcoholics Anonymous succeeded. While I was in treatment, I was required to attend AA meetings. There, I discovered that the same program that works for alcoholics works for negaholics too—and for food addicts and relationship junkies and control freaks, etc.

Because all addictions are basically suicide on the installment plan, I now consider misery addiction to be the granddaddy of all addictions. Obviously I'm not using the term *addiction* in the strictest technical sense here. Martyring, misery, caretaking, control, and many other codependent behaviors are deeply ingrained habits that may or may not be considered addictive disorders per se. They certainly aren't described as such in the lexicon of mental health professionals! But where recovery is concerned, they respond rather well to twelve-step programs. For that reason, I think of most excessive behaviors as addictions and address them as addictions in my personal and professional life.

Longstanding, deep-seated habits don't go away overnight. You can't simply dismiss them or casually wave them off. Recovery is a process, not an event. I began to change when I accepted the fact that I could not conquer my problems single-handedly.

Little by little, I woke up to the realization that it was OK to admit defeat. It was actually a relief. I could stop trying to accomplish the impossible. It wasn't working anyway! I discovered that *powerlessness* is not synonymous with *helplessness*. To admit my powerlessness was simply to acknowledge my need of help. Welcome to the real world, Carol!

Today, I celebrate the remission of my addiction to misery, one day at a time. I'm not cured, but I no longer enjoy martyring, obsessing, worrying, or being depressed. I don't get high on being mistreated and maligned. I don't set myself up to be abandoned. I prefer peace and serenity to the insanity of overwork, compulsive caretaking, and relentless self-pity. I cherish myself and treat myself with respect. I no longer feel compelled to borrow trouble or beg for burdens.

In *Fully Human, Fully Alive*, author John Powell describes people whose whole lives are like a perennial funeral procession.⁸ That was the story of my life. I didn't feel normal unless I was being neglected or rejected. I got high on being "weary, faint, and sore"—a phrase from one

of my workaholic grandfather's favorite gospel songs. No more! Do I ever relapse? Yes, but I haven't beat myself up for it lately!

While recovery has its ups and downs, and while the process of growth and change can be challenging, it is easier to pursue health and happiness than to entertain one's misery indefinitely. Letting go of old attitudes and developing new skills takes time, but the end result makes the effort worthwhile. Negaholics *do* recover! Anyone who has a desire to stop being negative *can* abstain from complaining, banish his or her worries, and refuse to whine—one day at a time.

In the ensuing pages, I'll list the characteristics of a martyr, explain what causes negaholism, show how it plays itself out in personal relationships, and describe how to kick the misery habit. Please note that I will be using the terms *addiction to misery*, *martyring* or *martyrdom*, *negativism*, *negaholism*, *negativity*, and *unhappiness* interchangeably.

Although I consider the negative thinking, believing, behaving habit to be as grave as alcoholism, I want to maintain a positive spirit here. To sob about misery addiction would be to succumb to it. I want to emphasize the light side while recognizing the dark. I'd hate for anyone to get depressed as a result of reading a book about addiction to misery! That's not what I have in mind. So let's laugh at least as much as we cry, dance to a peppy rhythm instead of a mournful tune. We don't even want to come *close* to taking ourselves or our recovery too seriously!

I'd be a real fake if I wrote about addiction to misery without including my own story. It begins with *powerlessness*. Any of the characters in chapter 2 could have been me.

Hope for Today

Most misery addicts think their unhappiness is inextricable, and their friends and family think it's inexcusable! In reality, it's neither. If you are hooked on unhappiness, cut yourself a little slack. It's OK to admit that you have a problem bigger than you and greater than all the resources you can muster from within yourself. Surrendering to your need of help is not the same as succumbing to weakness. Give yourself permission to end the futile struggle with negative thinking. You can't outthink the

habit of overthinking. Instead, reach outside yourself for help and support. When you stop trying to do the impossible, you open the door to an array of new possibilities.

Self-Study

1. Which, if any, of the incidents or issues mentioned in this chapter feel familiar to you? Based on your own experience, what do you relate to or identify with the most?
2. Choose one or more feeling words to describe how you are affected by what you have just read (a) happy, (b) hurt, (c) sad, (d) relieved, (e) angry.
3. Are you willing to embrace your truth? If so, write a paragraph describing what you think and feel regarding one or more painful childhood memories.
4. If you feel distressed or overwhelmed after reading this chapter, consider talking with a close friend or therapist about your response. Postpone reading chapter 2 until you have had time to integrate your feelings.

1. See 1 Kings 19:4.

2. My theology at that time allowed for only a male God. I no longer think of my Higher Power in terms of gender.

3. John Ratey, *A User's Guide to the Brain: Perception, Attention, and the Four Theaters of the Brain* (New York: Random House, 2001), 118, 123. While brain chemistry unquestionably plays a role in our emotional problems, my emphasis here is on taking responsibility for change. This would include getting an assessment by a viable medical professional to see if medication is indicated.

4. John Powell, *Fully Human, Fully Alive: A New Life Through a New Vision* (Niles, Ill.: Argus Communications, 1976), 63.

5. Edward M. Hallowsell, *Worry* (New York: Ballentine Books, 1997), xiv.

6. Lawrence Kohlberg theorized that there are six stages of moral development. In the earlier stages, young children are motivated to engage in socially acceptable behavior by fear of punishment or consequences. They are not mature enough to make ethical decisions based on high-level thought and intention.

7. Melody Beattie, *Codependents' Guide to the Twelve Steps* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1990), 10.

8. Powell, *Fully Human, Fully Alive*, 21.