The Opportunity of Addiction

From Fleeing to Feeling

What are you really seeking through your addiction?
A chance to *disappear*? Or to become *someone new*?
Why not stop the search.
And let yourself be found.

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24 January 1999

‘Aar, Aar… are you awake?’
‘What’s up, Ro? It’s three in the morning. Is it important?’
‘Yes, very important. I need to tell you something.’
‘Does it have to be now? Can’t it wait? I’m still half asleep.’
‘No, I need to say it now. I can’t stop thinking about it.’
‘Alright, alright, I’m coming.’

A few minutes later, my brother Roland and I are sitting at the kitchen table in my ground-floor flat on Hoogte Kadijk in Amsterdam. Roland’s eyes are tearful, but he looks happy, gentle, and alive. We sit in silence, looking at each other. Roland wants to speak, but struggles. He cries silently. We wait calmly until his voice returns. When he has composed himself, he whispers words that I will never forget.

‘Aar… I remember who I am.
I am not a junkie. I never was.
I am.’

PREFACE

My deepest wish is to remind you of this fundamental truth: there is nothing inherently wrong with you, even if you are grappling with an addiction. This is simply part of your journey, and you now have an opportunity to move forward from being stuck. You may be torn between the urge to break free from your addiction and the daily reality of using. I urge you to stop waiting for an external miracle and instead make the decision from within to view your addiction as an opportunity. By liberating yourself from it, you create an adventurous opportunity to meet your true self and confront the emotions you have long suppressed.

You and your addiction might have been tangled up for a while. Perhaps you feel desperate after countless attempts to break free, whether through time in a clinic, working through the 'twelve steps,' or seeking solutions with various therapists. Or maybe you haven't yet addressed your addiction, and reading this book is your first step.

To fully benefit from this book on your path to freedom, I encourage you to consider this perspective:

'The addiction to my substance or behaviour is not the root of the problem. The real issue is my internal struggle, which keeps me trapped. Understanding and seeing through my *true self* is key to achieving freedom.'

From my personal and professional experience with addiction, I wish to guide you through the maze you find yourself in. You may not yet understand why this matters

so deeply to me but having two drug-addicted brothers who profoundly impacted my development exposed me early on to the destructive force of addiction. I witnessed the misery their addiction caused, struggled to comprehend it, and sought to resolve it. This led to an unnatural sense of responsibility for others, which, ironically, transformed 'addiction' into my area of expertise. Through my experiences, I have learned that at the heart of every addiction is the same core issue: a rejection of the *self* or *the present moment*. I too faced this harsh reality. Until I realised that I was also reacting to my own self-rejection with escape behaviour, I believed I was the only non-addict among the three of us.

You have likely encountered numerous explanations, criticisms, and self-blame. I feel both love and compassion when I think of the struggle you are enduring. That's why I want to help you see things from a different perspective, so you can find openings in the wall you're now facing. You truly deserve to break free from your self-rejection and be reminded of your inherent innocence.

If you can change your perspective, a new path to freedom will emerge. Did you know that the original meaning of the word 'free' was 'loved' and 'cherished'? When you can view your body's actions and inactions—including addictive behaviour—with love and without judgement, the shift you desire will begin. I hope you will see your addiction, or that of a loved one, as a unique opportunity to stop fleeing and start feeling.

I also invite those experiencing the pain of living with an addict to reconsider your viewpoint. You may discover that your relationship provides the perfect opportunity to free yourself from behaviour patterns that don't truly reflect who you are.

I want to inspire you not to keep navigating the sea of addiction alone, as your boat fills with water and the waves rise. Drowning becomes a real possibility if you

continue waiting for a miracle. Your loved ones want to help and join you onboard, but now that you're all in it together, you might sink even faster. Air, light, and love are essential to making the mature decision to end your relationship with the substance. Once you do, you'll realise that you were never truly unsafe in the lighthouse's beam. It was always your own light guiding you. By no longer swimming against the current, you begin the journey back to a place you never really left.

I can't wait to welcome you there.

Warm regards,
Arold Langeveld

INTRODUCTION

'I need to pull myself together,' 'I need to keep myself in check,' or 'I need to learn to love myself.' I have always been struck by how casually we use the word *self* without clearly defining what we mean. When we talk about our *self,* it feels as though there are two of us. In everyday language, phrases like 'I am going to work on myself' and 'I want to become a better version of myself' imply that there is both an *I* and a *self*, leaving us unsure of who or what we are referring to. To clarify this, we must revisit the time when we first began to perceive the *self* as a given.

At that point, we were too young to understand what was happening. Perhaps this is why we later never truly questioned whom we were referring to when we talk about our *self*. Who, what, and where is the *I* in our body—the phenomenon that seems responsible for our actions, feelings, thoughts, and perceptions?

We cannot remember it, but there was a time when we did not experience a *self* or an *I* from which we viewed our lives, and we were not yet separate from what we perceived. Nothing or no one within us was preoccupied with 'itself' at that time. You might call this an undifferentiated 'state of being'. It was a state in which we were continuously one with what existed—whether a sensory perception, a feeling, a thought, or behaviour. There was no 'self-awareness' observing, weighing things, labelling or judging, let alone any form of self-rejection. It was a womb-like, all-encompassing unity that extended beyond birth into the physical world; the baby is one with the mother's breast from which it feeds and with the world that surrounds it.

I don't know exactly how long this 'state of being' lasted, but by the time we were two years old, we began to experience a distinction between our *self* and our environment.

The realisation that we are individuals revealed itself—a kind of energetic shift from the boundless everything to a so-called limited *I* in our body. Unconsciously, we then increasingly embraced ideas, images, and conditioning about this *I* that were offered to us by our surroundings. It began with a name, gender, and age, and then you noticed, in comparison with other children, whether you were small and plump or large and thin. Labels also emerged regarding your character: sweet or cheeky, grateful or ungrateful, selfish or sociable, sensitive or tough, calm or lively, and clever or funny.

And with this came norms: being sweet was good, being naughty was bad, being calm was cute, and being lively was unwelcome. Thinking of others was seen as sympathetic, while thinking of oneself was labelled as selfish. These labels were invariably dual in nature; they existed by virtue of their opposites. This often led to comparisons: 'Can't you behave a bit more normally, like your little brother?'

This imagery continued throughout your upbringing and intensified during adolescence, the period when you build the foundation of your identity. As a teenager, you explored who you could be by trying things out and pushing boundaries, which resulted in being punished or reprimanded, or rewarded if you did well.

This is a completely natural process, leading us to form ideas from a young age about what makes us 'good' or 'bad'. As a result, a *self*—often referred to as the *I*—develops, feeling wholly responsible for the actions and inactions of its body. This process gives rise to feelings of guilt, regret, and shame when things are not done well, and feelings of pride and merit when things are done well, according to the standards set by our upbringing.

Feelings formed during the time the *self* is developing can, if they involved judgement of your actions, remain palpable for a lifetime. For example, I still feel uncomfortable about an incident from over forty years ago. I borrowed my father's bike, which had once belonged to my grandfather. It was a beautiful green Bridgestone bike, which I can still vividly recall; it was often described as 'very expensive'. I went ice skating with friends, and when I arrived at the rink, they were already ready to leave. When we returned after two hours, the bike was gone. I had forgotten to lock it in my haste. I can still see the disappointment on my father's face. I remember him saying, 'How could you have done that?' I still feel uneasy about it, thinking it was my fault, as if I had done something terrible that I could have prevented.

Now that I've been a father for a while, I've noticed that what I initially found charming and spontaneous about my son, I later tried to change because it no longer suited me. For instance, I didn't mind at first if my son didn't give everyone a kiss at family events, but eventually, I started to interfere. I caught myself saying, 'Go give grandma a kiss,' not because grandma needed it, but because I wanted to show off what a sweet and well-behaved child my son was. I realised I was projecting my need for recognition onto my son, contrary to his natural inclinations.

From a young age, a child learns what they must do to be loved. My son also started giving kisses after some persuasion, not because he wanted to, but because I wanted him to. While I understand this is quite normal, I also recognise how we accept that a child must adjust early on by suppressing their own feelings, impulses, and intuition to conform to what we, as parents, believe they should or shouldn't do. This process gradually teaches us that our positive and negative feelings about ourselves are linked to our actions and inactions in the external world, further distancing us from our inner selves.

A substance as the answer

Sooner or later, our inner world demands attention when feelings that cause us suffering emerge. Unfortunately, learning how to deal with emotions has not been a consistent part of most of our upbringing or education. As we grew up, we internalised the belief that both negative and positive emotions exist, and so we try to suppress the negative and cling to the positive. This behaviour extends not only to ourselves but also to our children, leading us to search the external world for things that can positively influence our inner state. This tendency to eliminate so-called negative emotions by seeking external solutions does not leave us, even in adulthood.

Even as adults, we often don't know how to handle discomfort, tension, or suffering, so we try to end it as quickly as possible. It rarely occurs to us that it's okay to feel discomfort. In fact, we can actually connect with it by fully allowing the experience and being curious about our feelings. Since we were never taught this as an option, much of our energy goes into chasing 'good' feelings and avoiding 'bad' ones. This is where substances or activities come in, offering a quick fix to the emotions we reject. When these external solutions help suppress unwanted feelings, addiction can quietly take hold. The essence of every addiction is the same: it's a temporary external 'solution' for what's happening inside us.

Addiction is part of being human

Your addictive behavior is made up of patterns you didn't consciously choose. They took root at some point in your life. It's no coincidence that the word 'pattern' comes from the French word 'patron,' meaning 'boss.' Patterns often feel more powerful than

the body they control, leading us to use substances or engage in activities that may offer something but come with a cost when taken too far. This applies to substances, experiences, and activities you may never have considered addictive—think of success, money, sex, connection, perfection, possessions, your smartphone, sport, your partner, watching TV, your children, your house, your car, status, work, sweets, cryptocurrency, adventure, friends, painkillers, gossiping, overthinking, your pet, self-help books, the internet, hobbies, complaining, investing, romance, or spiritual experiences. These are all human needs, but when we use them to continually avoid something within ourselves, they can take on a compulsive nature. It seems normal for us to constantly strive for more, different, less, further, or better. We search, search, search, but never truly find. This is something everyone experiences.

Everyone recognises the power of addiction. I don't see addiction as a deviation or illness, but as a universal human response. Addiction is part of being human, and because of that, most people view their compulsive excesses as normal rather than addictive. Take something like social media usage: the fact that many people spend eight or more hours a day on their phones without any alarm bells ringing is, at the very least, remarkable. It's clearly addictive behaviour, even if there are no visible physical consequences, and we don't feel we're really suffering from it.

We typically view addiction as abnormal, concerning, or even pathological only when it involves obsessive use of things like alcohol, drugs, pills, sex, gaming, shopping, eating (or not eating), porn, or gambling. When these behaviours occur with such frequency and intensity that they cause 'harm,' that's when we start to worry. Often, those around the person are concerned earlier than the individual themselves. Personally, I distinguish between substances and activities we enjoy and those we use to suppress unwanted feelings. In the latter case, emotions we don't typically associate with our habits or addictions begin to surface—emotions like shame and guilt.

Shame and guilt

Over the past year, whenever I've mentioned writing about addiction, people have opened up, sharing stories—about their own habits or the addictions of those around them. I'm curious about your story. Perhaps you don't think your situation is that severe. You might be aware that you drink a little too much at times but wonder if it really qualifies as addiction. Or maybe you recognise you're caught in a habit and feel it's time to take it seriously. Perhaps you're living with someone spiralling into addiction and feel helpless, unsure of how to cope with your own emotions.

Whatever your connection to addiction, I want you to know that I empathise. I believe we're more alike than you might think. Almost everyone engages in behaviours their rational mind doesn't agree with—from eating chocolate biscuits to drinking whisky. We all face temptations, and we all give in significantly. We feel shame and judge ourselves for it. Many of us have managed to stay in control through willpower and discipline, only to slip back when old patterns resurface.

I always strive to listen and observe carefully when people struggle with their addiction, without intervening, offering solutions, or forming judgements. By withholding judgement and avoiding confrontation, trust is established, allowing me to witness the darkest corners of my clients' lives—those shrouded in such profound shame that they have never seen the light of day. Through countless sessions as a counsellor, I've gained a deeper understanding of what addiction truly entails. It has been a confronting, often heartbreaking and moving journey, yet also immensely hopeful. I have seen the confusion that surrounds addiction and why it seems so challenging to view both others' and our own addictions with compassion.

I am grateful for the encounters with all the remarkable individuals who have crossed my path, each with their own unique story. What they shared revealed a profound

identification with their habits and the accompanying feelings of guilt and shame. In an attempt to numb these feelings too, they became trapped in the suffocating lifestyle that accompanies addiction. Together with them, I explored alternatives to conventional treatment methods, leading to surprising insights and a new approach to understanding addiction that I hadn't previously considered.

A different perspective

In this book, I will share with you an alternative perspective on addiction. As you read, you'll notice that I revisit several insights repeatedly. This repetition is intentional; this alternative approach to addiction is likely so different from the reality you have come to accept that I want to encourage you to open your 'mindset' to a new way of seeing things.

Therefore, I ask you to be open to the possibility that your use is not the core of your problem. Your use is a reaction to the pain, sadness, boredom, emptiness, and helplessness that lie beneath and mask the confusion you feel about who you are. It is an escape from what manifests within and around you, and no one has taught you how to handle it differently.

I'm not sure if some people are inherently more prone to addiction than others. What I do observe is that, for some, accepting their sensitivity can be particularly challenging, leading them to believe they need a substance to cope with it.

To the loved ones of those struggling with addiction, I encourage you to stay curious if my message meets with resistance. Your frustration is completely understandable!

I have personally endured significant suffering due to my brothers' addictions, so I appreciate how the notion of acceptance and self-empowerment might be confusing. It was a revelation for me to discover that by accepting their life paths, I could release myself from feelings of helplessness, stress, and an unwarranted sense of responsibility.

Making peace with the present reality

As a counsellor, I stopped chasing an illusory future where things must be different from how they are now a long time ago. The foundation of my work is finding what we seek in the present moment. If there were a method that guaranteed freedom from addiction, it would have been discovered and widely implemented by now. Believe me, if anyone wanted to crack that code, it was me. But there is no code—no universal solution or step-by-step plan that works for everyone. In the realm of addiction, there are no fixed rules. The longer you work in this field, the more you realise how much we still don't know and that you must be prepared to discard all your knowledge and explore a personal approach for each client, together. I have witnessed too many miraculous events to cling to expectations and predictions. However, I am certain that specific decisions are inevitable for those who wish to transform their addictive behaviours into a loving relationship with themselves and their environment.

I sincerely hope you're open to a perspective that goes far beyond the narrow view of addiction as merely a physical condition or disease. Perhaps you've resigned yourself to the idea because you've been told you're 'powerless', that addiction is a lifelong, incurable condition requiring constant battles with discipline and willpower.

I want to introduce you to a different starting point—one that questions the existence of an *I* responsible for how your life has unfolded. Let's explore the

possibility that you are fundamentally innocent and that your use and addiction have never had the power to determine or change who you truly are.

I simply ask you to be open to the real possibility that the substance you're dependent on may lose its purpose once you discover your true identity. When you realise who you are beyond the story of your so-called failed *self*, you understand that change can only come when you are no longer in conflict with the *self* you reject. The first step is to make peace with your current situation, including the presence of an addiction. It's a part of the journey, not an insurmountable problem, if you are willing to view your addiction as an opportunity rather than something that has gone wrong or as a reflection of something 'wrong' with you. This could mark the beginning of a path characterised by self-acceptance, self-compassion, and self-love—a new path that allows you to process your past and shape your present life in a way that feels like home. A life shaped so that you no longer feel the urge to escape from it. How you get there doesn't matter. Perhaps you'll stop using and thereby remember who you are, or perhaps you'll remember who you are first, and then your use will stop.

An initial breakthrough in the tangle of misconceptions about yourself may come when you let go of the idea that you are an 'addict'. You 'have' an addiction, and you 'are' so much more than that! I prefer not to use the term 'addict' in this book. It may seem a bit forced, but it's important for us to move away from it because 'the addict' does not exist.

Naturally, this book could be filled with scientific findings on addiction, particularly from the field of neuroscience, which has seen significant research in recent decades. However, I prefer to share my personal experiences related to the addictions of my clients, my brothers, and myself. This is a more accessible reality for me, and one I'm eager to convey to you.

Note 1: Since I need a term to refer to 'someone with an addiction,' I will use the word 'user.'

Note 2: In this book, the terms 'use' and 'substance' also apply to behaviours or activities that one can become addicted to. Examples include gambling, pornography, gaming, eating, investing, sex, shopping, flirting, working, social media, and so on. I provide various examples of substances and behaviours. Since not every substance or behaviour and its corresponding use can be covered in detail, look for symptoms and underlying self-rejection that you might recognise, even if your specific addiction isn't mentioned.

Note 3: The practical examples are anonymised and altered so that no individuals can be identified.

Note 4: For readability, I use the masculine pronoun 'he' when referring to individuals. This naturally includes any other gender pronouns.