Chasing the Dragon - Can impulse control and addiction therapies assist some recreational decision makers?
Mark E Kelly*
Alaska Heliskiing, Haines, Alaska, USA
American Mountain Guide Association
American Institute for Avalanche Research and Education

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ABSTRACT: Recreational backcountry travelers pursue their chosen activities for a variety of reasons. Many of the reasons that recreationalists choose to travel in avalanche terrain are commonly acknowledged; pleasure, accomplishment, individualism, camaraderie and experiencing nature are some of the most common reasons that most participants would give. As educators and avalanche professionals, we have become familiar with and acknowledged many of the heuristic traps that decision makers in avalanche terrain can succumb to such as social proof, overconfidence, scarcity and others. When examining the heuristic trap of acceptance, parallels to the decisions made by individuals suffering from various forms of addiction such as gambling, over eating and sex addiction can be drawn. By looking closer at the role of impulse control in other self-destructive activities, can backcountry traveler’s benefit from treatment strategies applied toward other forms of addiction?

In many addiction therapies, recognizing that a problem is present is one of the first steps towards recovery. By comparing and applying the strategies applied in addiction treatment, backcountry travelers may be able to become more cognizant of their behavior in avalanche terrain and as a result, possibly make better decisions. “Powder fever” may be a condition of temporal discounting where participants may give greater value to rewards that are closer in time than future consequences. By reordering thoughts and recognizing long-term consequences, decision makers may be able to make better decisions and in some cases, avoid accidents.

1. INTRODUCTION

In western society, we currently live in an age of wanting more. It is common for a person to purchase their dream home, only to want something bigger or grander soon after. Considerable value is placed on having more money than is needed with the applied implication that “more” equates to happiness. Even the basic need of food is affected by this mindset of “more is better”. Looking at food portions in the US vs food portions in the EU or Asia provides an alarming realization that in the US portions can be twice as large. At most any fast food restaurant in the US, a medium drink would be the same size as a large or extra large overseas. In the same restaurant a single sandwich may be $5-6 but for pennies more you may “upsize” or add a drink and fries and 1000 calories. Possibly more than you intended to eat, but you just cannot pass up a deal.

As a result in the past decades it can be argued that society has developed new categories of addiction. Food addiction, sex addiction, gambling addiction and even Internet addiction have become recognized and common afflictions for our modern society. Everyone has heard the term “adrenaline junky”. Of course addiction is a term also used for chemical dependency. In this case we will be speaking more in terms of impulse control.

In most cases, regardless of the addiction, poor behavior can be attributed to temporal discounting. Temporal discounting (also known as time discounting or time preference) is a tendency for people to place more value upon immediate rewards rather than upon rewards or consequences in the distant future (a temporal horizon). If offered $10 today or $50 in a month, many will
choose the instant reward of the $10; this is an example of temporal discounting. A person succumbing to an overeating addiction values the reward of the pleasure of consuming that food immediately. Despite being aware of the consequences of increasing weight, long term associated health issues and perhaps personal disappointment for breaking their diet. A person suffering from sex addiction may indulge in inappropriate acts that provide instant gratification. These acts may have long-term consequences of relationship troubles, potential for disease or diminished self worth. A gambling addict may indulge in the pleasure-providing act of placing a bet, despite knowing that they will later need to deal with the consequences of betting money that they do not have, always hoping for the jackpot. For the powder addict, time spent in avalanche terrain may provide the instant feedback of enjoyment. Longer-term costs could be resulting injuries or worse.

1 RECOGNIZING ADDICTION

Addiction by definition is a process of compulsively engaging in rewarding stimuli despite adverse consequences. That is, repeatedly doing things that feel good despite the costs and damage caused to other areas of a person’s life, and being unable to stop or control this behavior. In this sense all addictions look fairly similar, whether it’s an addiction to alcohol, drugs, sex, gambling or powder snow. A person who is addicted will compulsively and repetitively engage in their activity in ways that become increasingly destructive over time.

Addictions are often referred to as being ‘progressive’, meaning that most of the time, an addicted person will engage in the addiction more and more the longer they remain addicted. Over time, an alcoholic will drink greater quantities and more often, a gambling addict will gamble greater sums, a powder addict will seek steeper slopes and more vertical. As the effects of addiction develop, tendencies will worsen over time. The addict might start giving up other things that they enjoy in their life, or neglecting minor tasks like housework or homework. If the addiction continues, they may increasingly give up more and more important parts of their life and neglect commitments including work, relationships and financial obligations.

Alongside neglecting and losing interest in other parts of their life, over time an addicted person will often become more protective of their addiction. That is, they will tend to try and prevent other things from interrupting or taking away their addiction. For some people, this can come across as irritability or aggression if their addiction is interrupted or criticized. For others, they may be more inclined to avoid conflict and try and find ways to continue their addiction where other people don’t see it or are less likely to interfere by isolating themselves and cutting off contact with others. Addicts may try to justify their actions with statements like “it makes me feel better” “it is better than doing ____” “you don’t understand” While reading this, have any of these thoughts crossed your mind?

Trying to be introspective and look at my own shortcomings, or in the eyes of others, it could be said that I have an addiction to skiing powder, especially in avalanche terrain. I can also see this trait in some, if not many, of my fellow snow sports participants. How does one identify these problems? Possibly by asking the question of yourself “have I ever done any of these things in order to pursue my addiction”?

- Spending money that should be allocated to other more responsible endeavors or items.
- Ignoring other responsibilities in order to participate in my chosen indulgence.
- Sacrificing important relationships such as family, friendship or intimacy for the reward of skiing powder.
- Engaging in dangerous activities despite being aware of severe or even fatal potential consequences.
- Rationalizing my behavior with statements like “I can quit any time”
"I am in control of my problem because..."

Feeling the need to increase the steepness or amount of powder you need in order to seek greater satisfaction.

Decided to do something you pledged not to because you witnessed other doing so.

I know that I would have to answer “yes” to all of these questions. I would consider it fair to assume that many of my fellow “powder addicts” would as well. There are even colloquialisms in the snow sport culture that embrace this behavior.

Have you ever heard or said “No friends on powder days”? Is “steep and deep” more attractive to you than “fun and fluffy”? Have you ever called in “sick” in order to go ski or ride on a powder day? Have you ever spent more than was appropriate on a new piece of gear, or a trip because you felt it increased your chances of a “perfect powder day”? Have you ever skied or rode in avalanche terrain that in hindsight you should not have? Have you ever justified taking greater risks in avalanche terrain because of your level of training or athletic ability? If a person were to answer “yes” to questions of this nature in reference to gambling, drug use, sexual habits etc. A problem with addiction or impulse control could be attributed. As with any form of addiction, recognizing a problem is the first step towards controlling the issue.

1.1 ADDICTION CYCLES

Early on in an addiction, a positive reinforcement cycle dominates and encourages a person to continue engaging in the behavior. (Fig. 1)

Before a person engages in the addictive behavior, there is a period of anticipation and excitement that occurs. This is followed by engagement in the activity itself, which leads to a positive emotional state and enjoyment. This engagement is often characterized by excessive use of the substance or activity, and is sometimes referred to as ‘binging’. The effects of this good feeling wear off over time, and the person returns to a normal emotional state which is then followed by another period of anticipation, sometimes referred to as ‘craving’. As a person engages in a particular addictive activity over a long period of time, this alters the way in which the brain processes and experiences reward. Over time, this becomes the “new normal”, as the brain becomes accustomed to a persistent level of stimulus. Consequently, levels of stimulus that are below this “new normal” are now less rewarding, as a result, greater stimulus is required to achieve the same level of stimulus. This is commonly termed as ‘tolerance’ when it comes to addictive drugs, this is part of the reason people tend to increase their addictive behaviors over time, as their brain no longer receives a positive reaction to lower levels of engagement. This goes beyond just the addictive behavior itself, and at this stage a person with an addiction will experience all activities as less enjoyable and less rewarding than they did prior to the addiction.

Fig. 1: Positive reinforcement cycle.

As an addiction to a substance or behavior develops, increasingly the negative reinforcement cycle drives their behavior. People with addictions at this stage experience little or no enjoyment from their activity of choice and often experience negative feelings if they stop engaging in the activity. At this stage, when not engaging in their chosen activity a person may experience dysphoria (low or negative moods), heightened symptoms of anxiety and stress. The powder addict calls this summer. When a person with an addiction then engages in their addiction, their negative moods and stress levels are brought back to what in a non-addicted person would be a “normal” level. However, this does not last, as the effects of the
substance or behavior wear off an anxious or dysphoric state returns. This is part of the reason why people with addictions can often become irritable, anxious or even overtly angry or hostile when their access to their addiction is prevented. (summer)

![Negative reinforcement cycle diagram]

**Fig. 2: Negative reinforcement cycle**

In most addictions, the positive and negative reinforcement cycles operate simultaneously. Simply put, the addicted person begins to only experience pleasure when they are engaging in the addictive behavior, and they begin to suffer from persistent stress and anxiety when not engaged in the behavior. This creates a strong motivation to continue the behavior.

### 1.2 IMPULSE CONTROL

Although there are chemical treatments for certain chemical or opiate addictions, most addiction treatments follow similar principles. This usually involves some form of “group therapy” which to be effective must address the parallel cycles of addiction described previously. An addict must find ways to rebalance the reward systems in their brain by engaging in positive behaviors.

At the same time, the addict must reduce triggering the stress systems in their brain by finding new ways to tolerate and regulate anxiety and the negative emotional conditions that arise when not engaging in the addictive behavior. Effective therapy will assist a person with an addiction to identify and engage in these new behaviors.

Identifying the “triggers” that are unique to each person and lead to their addictive behavior often does this engagement.

For example, powder addicts may find that it is only when skiing steep powder and avalanche terrain that they experience a sense of being of value and social acceptance, consequently when they have experiences in their lives that cause them to feel devalued or unaccepted, they may wish return to riding steep avalanche prone slopes. Successful treatment would involve helping a person recognize that conservative actions are as respected as aggressive ones, and to explore other ways to find a sense of purpose and excitement that do not involve potentially injurious consequences.

There are a variety of techniques applied to other forms of addiction that could possibly be applied to a “powder junkie”. Ultimately all of these techniques are ways of assessing the problem and re-ordering thought processes in order to make better choices. None of these techniques are a “magic bullet” that will completely solve the problem but rather ways to form more healthful habits.

In general, an addiction to skiing powder, even in avalanche prone terrain, is an overall healthful activity. The activity itself involves exercise, time spent in nature and positive interaction with friends and colleagues. It is only when poor choices are made that the activity becomes exceedingly dangerous.

Unlike other forms of addiction used as examples here that over time gradually create health risks or create other life problems, the pursuit of powder has an extremely poorly defined feedback loop. Many participants will experience a lifetime of powder pursuits without ever experiencing a negative event. In comparison, many people can drink or gamble casually without ever falling into a destructive cycle (we all eat, but only some develop an overeating problem). There are often underlying life problems that provide a catalyst for a benign activity to become a dangerous addiction. Some people may be suffering from depression, predisposed genetically or possibly have experienced a life trauma that they are inadvertently self-medicating with the distraction of another activity.

Regardless of the underlying reasons for impulsive behavior, degree of risk or severity of consequences, there are some common impulse control techniques that can be applied to make better choices. In this
discussion, applications to the “powder addict” are

- Strengthen your support network (chose partners carefully).

- Get organized (Prepare proper tour plans).

- Identify risks (Identify where problems are likely to be encountered and avoid them, certain aspects or inclines).

- Avoid poor influences (Traveling in places where other groups behaving poorly may encourage you to do so as well).

- Write down your goals (Record pledges to avoid certain areas or features).

- Ask for help or accountability (Encourage partners to call you out when acting impulsively).

- Before ascending or descending, compare pros and cons. (Is this run worth getting hurt or dying for)?

1.3 SUMMARY

While the need to ski steeper and steeper terrain may not be viewed as an addiction, the term “adrenaline junky” has become common vernacular. Most laypersons would think of base jumpers and rock climbers as “adrenaline junkies” but would certainly be likely to put “extreme” skiers and riders into this category as well.

Combating any problem of impulse control begins with first recognizing that behaviors may be inappropriate. Once “admitting” that there could be a problem, corrective actions can be made. By simply being mindful of actions and reordering thought processes, behavior can be modified and better results achieved.

REFERENCES


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