



WEAKNESSES OF THE STRONG

You are successful, you manage to get everything done, you live a full life... you have negotiations in Hong Kong today and a meeting in London two days later, followed by a weekend in Rome... It seems there is no room for weakness in your life and that bad habits and addictions are the fate of unorganized people and losers, groups to which you have never belonged.

TEXT *Maryana Hautmann*

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Prof. Wulf Rössler

is a world-famous practitioner in psychiatry and psychology. He graduated from the Heidelberg University with a degree in medicine (MD) and psychology (MSc) and focuses on social medicine and rehabilitation. Prof. Rössler has huge clinical experience and has held many executive positions: director of the state psychiatry program (Baden–Wuerttemberg); deputy head of the psychiatric service department and head of the research department of the mental health service at the Central Institute of Mental Health (Mannheim); director of the psychiatric services program in Zurich; and president of the drug abuse commission and medical director of a drug clinic in Sonnenbühl. He is also a member of the Board of the European Psychiatric Association.

He is a regular speaker at scientific symposia, has implemented a range of large-scale research programs and has authored many publications, including 550 articles and 350 PubMed entries. Prof. Rössler is a member of the editorial boards of several academic journals.

However, addictions are very cunning, insinuating their way into our lives unnoticed, and gradually replacing all else.

The tighter your schedule and the less you indulge in relaxation, the greater the risk that an addiction will find a weak point in your mind and make a hole in it.

The Kusnacht Practice is a place where they know how to cope with disorders, and Prof. Wulf Rössler is among the top professionals in his trade. He knows a way out of the intricate labyrinth of human weaknesses, fears, and things that we hide away even from ourselves.

– **Professor Wulf, what addictions, would you say, are the most pertinent today? Who are your patients?**

– Usually, they are serious-minded and successful businessmen, not light-minded young people, as one might suppose. They work intensely, travel all over the world, cross multiple time zones, and many have no family, stay at hotels and have meals at restaurants... In short, they are living in a harsh world. And in this rat race, people, very often unnoticed even by themselves, develop addictions, whether to their work, or alcohol or whatever else.

Clearly, alcohol is one of the most widespread issues. In Western countries, alcohol is a legal product, a part of social life. In the Western European community, approximately 20% of the population are moderate drinkers or do not drink alcohol at all. The remain-

ing 80% drink alcohol every day, during lunch or dinner, and do not suspect that they have a problem. Troubles become manifest in 3 to 7 years, when a person suddenly understands that he is not longer able to control his life.

Tobacco is another drug that is often underestimated, and smoking is closely linked with alcohol. Many of our patients do not plan to quit smoking at the beginning, but later, in the process of treatment, find this idea attractive. There is a belief that drinking is acceptable, unless it's excessive. However, our philosophy is complete abstinence from alcohol, narcotics and smoking, and not controlled consumption.

– **It seems that people build their business, try to control absolutely everything, but lose sight of their**

health. In what way do you approach them – do you offer them the idea that their health is a business that also needs to be controlled?

– Ye, we do, and it requires great will power. And such people usually have a strong character. They may be extremely disciplined patients, if they really manage to find a business approach to their body.

– **You achieve the best results with this kind of patient, don't you?**

– Their desires and intentions play a huge role. However, there is one more important thing. Very often, the so-called «gilded youth» comes to us. If you deprive them of narcotics (subject to their consent of course), you should suggest something else instead. In addition, they can no longer remain in their previous environment. Jointly with such young people, we plan in what direction their future life will lead, otherwise they will be at risk of becoming addicted again. They should learn to control their life. Usually, disciplined people succeed. Therefore, abandoning narcotics is not the most difficult thing. It is more difficult to master internal control, and it is this very skill that we help our patients to master. On average, they spend about eight weeks at our clinic, and then we assign them a personal counsellor who helps them get back to a normal life.

– **What addictions affect women most often?**

– Anorexia. There are different types, for example, bulimia, when periods of abstinence from food are followed by gluttony, since a person is unable to constantly resist temptation. A person breaks down and eats everything she can find; for example, she cooks three servings of pasta and eats it all at once. Then she feels regret and induces vomiting. We teach such a person to lead a healthy lifestyle and stick to the right diet.

There are also addictions not connected with the consumption of any substances, such as gambling addiction or sex addiction or workaholism.

– **And what about love addiction?**

– Love addiction is a different thing. It is addiction to a particular person.

– **Is there such a thing?**

– Sure there is. Almost everything is possible in this life. However, workaholics are the most interesting and the most numerous of our customers. These are people addicted to their work. When they try to relieve the strain by themselves, they often start taking drugs or become addicted to sex. This is the case, for example, with very successful people. Striking up and maintaining a relationship is difficult for them, as they are always busy. It's not easy to get rid of this disorder, which is also true for a gambling addiction.

– **What is the difference between addiction to work and, for example, addiction to sex?**

– It doesn't matter what a person is addicted to. Addiction is a disease – you lose self-control, and it can do anything it likes to you. A person addicted to sex perceives it as a necessity, and he simply can not resist.

As regards addictions connected with stimulating substances, it makes sense to divide them into two groups: some calm you down (such as alcohol), while others excite you (such as heroin and all lifestyle narcotics). And what do we usually see? People take stimulating narcotics, and when their excitement becomes too strong, they take sedatives, and this cycle repeats itself endlessly. Of course, such a strong and frequent shift of consciousness wears their body out.

– **Can you tell where the borderline between commitment and addiction to work is?**

– Addiction is when a person can not stop, when there is no end. A person forgets about himself, about his body and about his spirituality. He is tired, but still continues working. Sometimes, he won't eat anything, since he has no time to eat. Some people work 15-16 hours per day...

We had a patient who worked in Asia for a long time. He lived at hotel and was always available, by Skype or telephone, to his partners. At some point in time, he no longer noticed what time it was or whether it was day or night. When people in Asia were asleep, he was having conferences with Europe and during the daytime or in the evening he was discussing something with his Asian colleagues. He did not even think about the fact that he needed rest! When you abandon rest, you become addicted to your work.

– **Do men or women suffer from workaholism more?**

– Men suffer more, but still there are business ladies whose addiction is as strong as in men. And when patients come to us, we can not just take them out of their work environment. First, they need to learn to structure their working process. During treatment they start to notice that, firstly, there is life after work and, secondly, that their business is running pretty smoothly and there is no need to control it on a 24/7 basis.

– **What do children think about the addiction of their parents? Should patients bring their children with them?**

– We do have programs for families, since the troubles of one person affect also his family. Time and again I have seen a so-called «difficult» child who maltreated their parents because the latter were neglecting their duties, while a child should feel that his parents are always near. That's what we discuss

Addiction is a *disease* – you lose self-control, and it can do *anything* it likes to you



within family programs. Children have the right to speak up, and they should be given an opportunity to say, for example, to their father: «Dad, I don't remember the last time I saw you sober.» We try to foster a respectful atmosphere in the family, where everyone can speak up, but in a way that will not offend anyone.

– **Do programs at your clinic include drug therapy?**

– Sometimes we do use drug therapy, although we start with dietary supplements to restore the natural biochemical balance in the body. This is the first point of our work. However, there are depressions or other mental disorders which can not be treated without drugs.

– **When can addiction lead to suicide?**

– Most often, suicidal thoughts appear when a person is disappointed with his life; for example, in the case of the loss of a beloved person or a breakdown. We studied this issue and determined that the risk of suicide is thirty times higher during the first week after a partner's death. After one year, it is still five times higher than normal. And even if a person just leaves his family, many people perceive this as a death. Often they say, «It would be better for me if he had died, rather than for me to see him with another person.»

Sometimes, it is difficult to cope with emotions, and all this affects the mind. Man is a social creature, and many people cannot bear to be alone.

– **Addiction to work or to sex reflects on personal relationships primarily, don't you think?**

– Right you are! It is unlikely that you will have a calm attitude to adultery and allow each other to have sexual relations outside the family. Whenever monogamy is practiced, people expect marital fidelity from their spouse. By the way, most successful managers work so hard and intensely that they cannot strike up a relationship and create a family, and even if they do have a family, it eventually breaks up. However, such people are very attractive to the opposite sex, and not only physically but because they have achieved much on their own.

It has always been obvious to me that money won't make a person happy. But now I also know than money can make a person miserable.

– **Is that another addiction – money?**

– Yes, there is such a thing as money addiction. Everything starts with a blurring of the boundaries and extravagant spending. A normal person cannot buy everything he wants: he must economize and set money aside. But when you have plenty of money, you will end up with no more wishes left to realise.

There are very rich people, those who have been rich for many decades, but who live a very modest life. Take, for example, Bill Gates: he established the world's largest charitable foundation. I repeatedly ask my patients: why don't you set up a charitable foundation? Some reply that it is a good idea, but then their money would not be inherited by their children. Often, life becomes boring for very rich people, so the main thing for them is to find the meaning of life. It is something that makes their life liveable. It is not easy, but it really worth it.

ADDICTION FROM WORK

Despite the trappings of success, for workaholics it is difficult to build and maintain relationships, to start a family – they are constantly doing business.

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