

By Yvonne Hess

Everyone struggles at times for control in life, striving to become powerful and in charge of his or her path. Our American culture idolizes those who accomplish great feats. Addicts and alcoholics also attempt to take charge of their addictions. Many addicts spend years trying to exert their personal power to minimize the impact of drugs on their lives. Men and women enter Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), Narcotics Anonymous (NA) or treatment convinced that they can control their addictions with enough force of will. They resist the AA/NA statement that says, "I am powerless" over whatever drugs they are using. They sit in the midst of a raging internal battle determined to prove that they are not powerless, determined to conquer addiction on their own. Too many times I've heard that rallying cry. I've seen how it has led the addict to death, imprisonment, or a life overrun with emotional crises. One of the key aspects of treatment is to address and challenge those ingrained, irrational truths that block recovery. In this case, it is to define and explain the difference between "power" and "control." Most people use these terms interchangeably and think nothing of it. In the addiction field, power and control are very different concepts and learning to use them in a healthy way creates new doorways for recovery. The term "power" is the concept of having authority over something or someone. For instance, a boss has power over his/her employees. The boss has authority that was granted by someone else, such as the owner of the company. When one company takes over another in a hostile merger, one company wrests the power away from the other company. Control is the concept of influencing something or someone. A person can influence an outcome, a process, a person, or an environment by how they move within a situation. For instance, a mother can influence how her child feels by what she says. She can build her child up or tear her child down. Control is often more significant than power in that a person with little or no power in a situation can exert life-changing influence. When I was in active addiction and I went to NA meetings and counseling, I raged against the word "powerlessness." I literally tantrummed, yelled and refused to accept this concept. I was a 3-year-old locked in a battle over Cheez-Its. I was stuck in the misunderstanding that power was the same control. I struggled and whined and, finally, the kind soul of my counselor helped me stop tantrumming long enough for him to explain the difference. My being at a meeting or session was a way of influencing the outcome of my addiction - the addiction that I had been in mortal combat with for years, failing over and over to wrestle power away from it. I had become bloody and battered, and close to death. I finally understood that I was not giving up my life by admitting that I had no power to control my addiction; I was actually gaining my life by focusing my energy in a healthy direction. Addiction is a brain disease. I cannot wave my hand in front of my face and wish it good-bye. But, I can influence the way I react to my addiction by the choices I make. As a counselor, I offer compassion to my clients who are chewing on this issue, trying to come to terms with terms. Yvonne Hess is a Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist (LMFT) and a Certified Addictions Professional (CAP) with an International Certification as an Alcohol and Drug Counselor (ICADC) who works for the Citrus County Health Department's Phoenix Program. She can be reached at 527-0068, ext. 272 or by e-mail at yvonne_hess@doh.state.fl.us