

5 Addiction Myths Challenged by Maia Szalavitz in *Unbroken Brain*

Unbroken Brain: A Revolutionary New Way of Understanding Addiction braids together three narratives: Maia Szalavitz's personal story, what the science reports about addiction, and a call to action to change belief-based addictions treatment to evidence-based treatment.

Prior to the release of *Unbroken Brain*, Maia Szalavitz shared these images about the myths surrounding addiction and the science that refutes them through her Twitter stream.

Myth #1: There is an “addictive personality” that all people with addiction share.

People with addictions are more likely to have higher levels of certain traits like impulsivity or anxiety, however, not all addicted people have all of these traits and no single “addictive personality” has ever been found. Further, extremes on either end of the personality spectrum – like fearfulness and recklessness – can both increase risk.

Myth #2: Once an addict, always an addict.

Conventional wisdom has it that addictions are always a lifelong struggle. But in fact, half of people with illegal drug addictions overcome their problems by age 30 – and many do so by cutting down, rather than quitting entirely.

Myth #3: Addiction is an “equal opportunity” disease.

Not everyone is equally at risk. Addiction typically kicks people who are already down or who have unstructured or otherwise difficult lives. It is far more likely to affect people who have mental illness, those who have suffered severe childhood trauma, people with personality disorders and those who are poor and marginalized (although it is probably more common in the extremely rich who have more unstructured time than the middle class, as well).

Myth #4: Babies can be “born addicted” to drugs.

Infants can be born with physical dependence on drugs like heroin or pain relievers if their mothers take them daily during pregnancy. But newborns cannot be addicted, even though they can suffer withdrawal. Addiction requires knowing that the drug is what you need to fix your symptoms, as well as being able to obtain it repeatedly and then taking it despite negative consequences.

Myth #5: Addicts have “hijacked brains” and are powerless over their behavior and unable to learn until they stop taking drugs.

While much of addictive behavior seems irrational, no one deliberately shoots up in front of the police or in court – and people with addiction clearly plan and work hard to ensure their drug supply and avoid detection. On the other hand, they do all this hiding and planning in order to gain access to something that is harmful for them.

This means that people with addiction can have impaired decision-making abilities, but they are not zombies without free will. While addicted, they can and do take important steps to protect their health and like learning to use clean needles and how to reverse overdose.