

### Get a grip

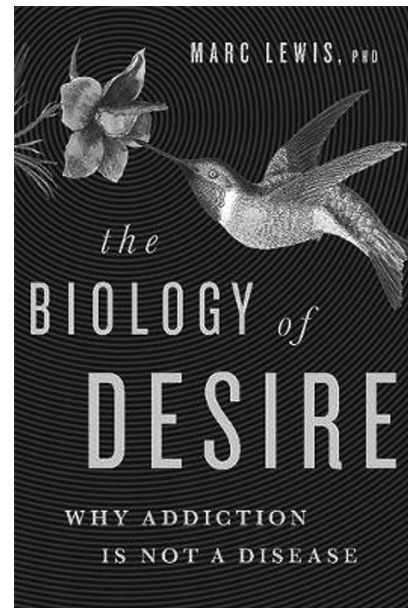
#### *The Biology of Desire*

by Marc Lewis

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#### Marianne Szegedy-Maszak

- 1 In 1956, the American Medical Association absolved alcoholism from the charge of being a moral failing or a destructive bad habit and labelled it an official disease. Acknowledging the changes in brain structure among severe problem drinkers and eventually in other addicts, the AMA concluded that addiction paralleled other diseases such as Alzheimer's or diabetes. 7, this meant that by the mid-1980s insurance companies were paying for treatment. It also led to the development of effective drugs to ease the symptoms of withdrawal and the rise of a highly profitable industry for addiction services. Today the National Institute on Drug Abuse reflects the standard approach, succinctly describing addiction as a "disease that affects both the brain and behaviour".



- 2 The disease model also 8 an addict's claim that willpower was not enough to control the habit. How could someone with Alzheimer's be criticised for forgetting where the keys are? And how could an alcoholic who was wired for a drink be criticised for not being able to stop?
- 3 But, in fact, addicts can and do stop. And according to Marc Lewis in *The Biology of Desire*, this reveals a basic problem with the medicalisation of addiction. "People choose to stop when they have suffered more than enough," he writes. "And when circumstances lend a hand. And when the possibility of 9 becomes as attractive – more attractive – than any other possibility, including temporary relief."
- 4 "I'm convinced that calling addiction a disease is not only inaccurate, it's often harmful," Lewis writes (repeatedly). "Harmful first of all to addicts themselves." The alternative, he asserts, is to call addiction what it is: a really bad habit caused by a constellation of variables and a brain that is receptive to compulsively reinforcing really bad habits. Most important, that habit is possible to break, not by becoming a "patient" getting medical attention in order to "recover", but by becoming a responsible adult with a solid vision of the future who has at last decided to break a destructive habit.

5 Lewis speaks not just from the Mount Olympus of academic science — he's a neuroscientist and professor of developmental psychology now in the Netherlands and previously at the University of Toronto — but also as a former addict himself. His book *Memoirs of an Addicted Brain*, which appeared in 2011, chronicled his tormented resume, from binge drinking in high school, to LSD and cannabis in college, to mainlining heroin and taking so many amphetamines that he once went psychotic. *The Biology of Desire* is less autobiographical but no less personal. Lewis is still the former addict, but in this book the neuroscientist takes charge, and the stories of other addicts provide the narrative drama.

6 "Most of the recovered addicts I've talked to would rather think of themselves as free — not cured, not in remission," he notes. "Having overcome their addictions by dint of hard work, intense self-examination, and the courage and capacity to regrow their perspectives (and their synapses) they'd rather see themselves as having *developed* through addiction and become stronger as a result." The italics are his.

7 And they are revealing because Lewis's fundamental argument is that addiction is overcome when people change their minds and choose to stop.

adapted from *The Washington Post*, 2015