

# Addiction: Are We All Wrong About Its Causes?

There is a commercial familiar to anyone who grew up in the 1980s. It involves a white rat in a cage furiously attacking a pill.

"Only one drug is so addictive nine out of ten laboratory rats will use it ... and use it ... and use it," a raspy voice murmurs, "until dead."

The rat thrashes around for a bit, then stops and lies still. "It's called cocaine and it can do the same thing to you."

The commercial was the second most memorable anti-drug ad of the generation, in my opinion. ([This](#) was unforgettable; [this](#) took home the bronze. [This](#) was honorable mention.) It really scared the hell out of me. As a young man, I experimented a little, but I never dreamed of touching cocaine. The picture

of that dead rat was burned into my brain.

The problem is, the research the commercial is based upon is incomplete.

In his bestselling book [\*Chasing the Scream\*](#), British journalist Johann Hari highlights a different study from the 1970s conducted by Bruce Alexander, a psychologist and professor from Vancouver. Alexander noticed something peculiar: the rats in these experiments were always solitary.

*What would happen if the rats weren't alone?* he wondered.

Eager to find out, Alexander created an environment he called [\*Rat Park\*](#), a happy home where rats enjoyed playgrounds and the company of other rats. He discovered these rats “had much less appetite for morphine than rats housed in solitary confinement.” Importantly, none of the rats in the happy environment died from overdose.

Alexander's research is just one of the many pieces of evidence Hari cites in his book, a three-year project that led him to a startling conclusion: “Almost everything we think we know about addiction is wrong.”

Hari himself comes from a family of addicts. One of his earliest memories, he says, is trying to wake up a family member and not being able to. Addiction is still part of his life. In his book, we see a former lover huddled on a spare bed following a binge on heroin and crack, desperate to get sober for 48 hours (after that, Hari's ex-partner says, it gets easier).

The story-telling in *Chasing the Scream* is honest, beautiful, and tragic. And always informative. It leads to a conclusion that is simple yet profound: when dealing with addiction, environment matters *a lot*.

This might sound simplistic, but it challenges the typical

view the left and right tend to take in matters of addiction. The right tends to view addiction as a moral failing: people are simply too weak to kick their habit. The left, on the other hand, tends to view addiction as a “disease,” an illness people are all but helpless against.

Hari would seem to reject both views (or, perhaps, take a little from each). And he makes a compelling case.

To show that the link between environment and addiction is not merely a quirk among rats, he points to the behavior of U.S. soldiers during and after the Vietnam War.

“*Time* magazine reported using heroin was ‘as common as chewing gum’ among U.S. soldiers,” [he wrote](#) in a 2015 article for Huffpost, “and there is solid evidence to back this up: some

20 percent of U.S. soldiers had become addicted to heroin there, according to a study published in the Archives of General Psychiatry.”

The same study found that 95 percent of addicted soldiers simply gave up heroin when they returned to the states. The environment for nearly all of these men, Hari points out, had changed from a dark one to a happier one.

Assuming the data is solid, the findings are astonishing and would seem to challenge our basic understanding of chemical addiction. Granted, not all addicted soldiers gave up heroin; but a 95 percent sobriety rate following heroin addiction is something I’d wager a director of any rehab clinic in the U.S. would be thrilled to achieve.

Hari uses an avalanche of evidence and powerful anecdotes that will leave many readers with a simple conclusion: we’re waging the War on Drugs all wrong. But to reach this conclusion one must first accept the real thesis of Hari’s work.

“The opposite of addiction is not sobriety,” he writes. “It is human connection.”

I don’t believe we’ll ever “win” the War on Drugs. I don’t agree with some of Hari’s conclusions, but I believe he’s correct when he says the best way to fight addiction is with human connection – or, dare I say, human fellowship.