

Breaking Free: How Philosophy, Faith, and Lived Experience Shape Addiction

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April 2026

MUNCIE IN. – “I started smoking cigarettes when I was 10, moved into alcohol when I was 13-14, and moved into marijuana, then cocaine, shot up, pills, done angel dust, you name it, I did it.” That’s how former addict Dan Scott describes the moment his life began to spiral, and the need to fill a void began. Today, he is 56 years old and has been sober for almost 27 years.

The definition of addiction is “a chronic, relapsing brain disease characterized by compulsive drug seeking, substance use, or behaviors despite harmful consequences.” Addiction affects every city, state, county, and country in the world, making it an affliction nobody is safe from. The opinion of addiction varies, but the impact is always the same and never any easier. Some people believe it’s spiritual; some think it’s a weakness; and others believe it’s not a choice for some. Regardless of the opinion, substance abuse brings mental and physical pain to not only those using but also those around them.

Choice or Condition?

Philosophy is the study of fundamental questions concerning existence, knowledge, value, reason, and reality. With this idea in mind, is addiction a loss of free will, or a personal choice? Philosophy professor, Melinda Messineo, believes all individuals are subject to addiction given the right circumstances. “We are all vulnerable to losing our ability to be moderate and being vulnerable to substance use disorders.” Said Messineo. “As long as we treat it like an individual weakness, we are never going to be able to mobilize enough support and resources to really clamp it down.”

This perspective challenges the idea that drug and alcohol use is simply a matter of personal choice. Instead, suggesting that being vulnerable is shaped by an individual’s environment, biology, and circumstances. Research from the [National Institute on Drug Abuse](#) argues that addiction alters brain chemistry and systems involved in decision-making and impulse control, contradicting the idea that people can simply “choose to stop”.

However, philosopher Daniel Dennett argues that even if our brains are influenced by biology and environment, we still have enough “free will” to be responsible for our choices. From this point of view, individuals still make choices, even if they are influenced by addiction.

This debate has been going on for hundreds of years and has real consequences. If people see addiction as only a failure in someone's life rather than a struggle, rehabilitation will seem like a punishment rather than help, but if it is seen as a medical condition, there will be a shift in the social view.

For individuals living with addiction, however, the debate between choice and condition is not an idea; it's real-life.

Inside Addiction

Daniel Scott is a Muncie resident who has been sober for over 27 years. For him, drugs didn't start as a coping mechanism, but grew to be one. "All the older guys smoked, so I wanted to be like the tough older guy. I started smoking also. The tough older guys drank, so I drank, and it kind of started from there." Said Scott.

This is the case for many young people who are impressionable and just want to fit in. According to the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) most adults with substance use disorders began using drugs or alcohol during adolescence, emphasizing how early exposure and peer influence can lead to long-term addiction patterns. This aligns with Gabor Mates work, which argues that addiction is often rooted in pain and trauma, rather than moral weakness. For Daniel, these aren't just statistics; they reflect a reality he lived through, before he understood the larger pattern.

Over time, it wasn't just fun anymore; it was an undeniable urge that Daniel would've done anything to fulfill. But being addicted not only has financial and physical effects but can also lead to life-changing ones.

"The turning point came when I owed coke dealers \$300, and I couldn't pay them, and I ran to the Salvation Army, went through their adult rehab program for 6 months, and haven't touched a drink or drug since." Said Scott. This is the reality for many people struggling with substance abuse, and that's when the by-products of addictions begin to bring a community down, even if only a few residents are struggling.

In communities like Muncie, addiction is not an individual struggle; it can strain families, increase social service demands, and affect how people see neighborhoods, safety, trust, and support systems.

Faith and Recovery

For many individuals struggling with addiction, isolation doesn't help; community does.

Pastor Neil Kring works with the Addictions Coalition of Delaware County and preaches for the Avondale neighborhood in Muncie, says the biggest things that factor into addiction are the situations that create despair for the community.

“High rate of poverty, lack of affordable housing, people who maybe have been in the system not being able to navigate their way into better job opportunities.” Said Kring. “I know a lot of people who are on the streets using substances who are really just doing it, coping with mental health challenges that they're having.”

This perspective shifts the conversation away from blame and towards community issues that contribute to addiction. In many cases, substance use is not the root of the problem, but rather the short-term solution to the emotional burdens outside factors bring, like long-term instability, trauma, and mental illness.

According to the [Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration](#), recovery is most effective when people have access to stable support systems like community care, treatment programs, and recovery services. Faith-based recovery efforts like churches and local organizations often provide what the community may lack, like consistent relationships, accountability, and a sense of community and belonging. According to the [National Institute on Drug Abuse](#), effective recovery usually requires long-term treatment and a constant social connection, emphasizing that overcoming an addiction is not through willpower alone. Kring emphasizes that community is a need for individuals in recovery.

“As their pathway to getting better and healing, and some of that healing is just being reconnected with people.” Said Kring.

Between Choice, Condition, and Response

The question of whether addiction is a choice or a condition cannot be settled with just one neat answer. Philosophy, lived experience, and faith-based recovery are all different perspectives with different opinions and beliefs about addiction and what causes it, along with how to overcome it. Substance abuse is something personal, where biology, environment, and personal history overlap and can become difficult to separate. For Daniel Scott, addiction was something learned, which started harmlessly and unfolded gradually, shaped by his environment. For Pastor Neil Kring, addiction is tied to a broader reality of community struggles like poverty, mental health, and lack of opportunities within the community. For philosophy, the debate will continue between those who see behavior shaped by forces beyond human control and those who argue that free will is still part of the human experience and outweighs the effects of addictions.

The recognition that addiction rarely exists in isolation is what connects these perspectives and ideas, not agreement. Within the system, it develops, is influenced by relationships, and is sustained or disrupted by access or support.

In the end, the question may not be whether addiction is a choice or condition, but how society chooses to understand and respond.