

Review

Partington, Andy. (2023). *Hope in Addiction: Understanding and Helping Those Caught in the Grip*, Moody Publishers, Chicago.

By Estera Boldut, PsyD

What does it mean to be the church in a world where addiction reaches epidemic proportions? How can loved ones who struggle with addiction be cared for? Where do carers turn for hope?

Andy Partington writes with deep care and meticulous research for two groups of people: the church (leaders, members and educators), and for families and friends of those caught in the grip of addiction. His book is about how we should be the church together: “*for, amongst, and as* people who are at risk of addiction, in active addiction, and in recovery from addiction” (p. 20). Andy Partington was raised in a rehabilitation environment from the age of five, and as an adult walked alongside people from diverse cultural contexts, struggling with addiction that took many forms (substance abuse, gambling addiction, porn dependency, workaholism, out-of-control gaming habits, and technology use disorders). The goal of his book is to bring hope so that as children of God can experience freedom from the enslavement of addiction.

Partington divides his book in three parts: in the first part, he sheds light on what drives the journey into addiction, exploring the underlying causes of today’s addiction epidemic. The second part focuses on understanding the mechanisms and experiences of life in addiction. The last part of the book underlines the ways out of addiction, offering hope and practical support.

Part One: The Age of Addiction

Part One tackles the question how did the culture found itself in an addiction pandemic? Using data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and well-crafted stories, Partington paints the picture of addiction as “the thematic malady of our time”. To understand, prevent and treat addiction, Christians need to look beyond statistics, powerful substances and stimulating activities. He identifies four features of modern life that contribute to the pandemic: (1) a pervasive sense of hopelessness that often leads to despair, (2) an intense feeling of emptiness and dissatisfaction, (3) trauma and adverse childhood experiences, and (4) loneliness, disconnection and lacking a sense of belonging.

To conclude the first part of his book, Partington argues that many are drawn to addiction because “when we look forward, we feel hopeless; when we look within,

we find emptiness; when we look behind us, we see stories characterized by abuse, neglect, dysfunction and regret – adversities that left us wounded- and, when we look around us, we find we are disconnected from others, detached from a sense of community and belonging, bereft of close relationships” (p.81). This is true for all other addictive behaviours - they are both a comfort and an escape from the harsh realities of life.

Part Two: Understanding Addiction

Addiction is not easy to diagnose; it is an abstract concept, a social construct with fuzzy boundaries. Taking Robert West and Jamie Brown’s diligent analysis of numerous theories of addiction, Partington defines addiction as “a chronic condition involving a repeated powerful motivation to engage in a rewarding behaviour, acquired as a result of engaging in that behaviour, that has significant potential for unintended harm” (p.90). He examines the five elements of this definition: (1) addiction is a chronic condition; (2) a strong motivation to engage in the addictive behaviour and an inability to make healthy choices. Partington quotes Judith Grisel who states that “the opposite of addiction is not sobriety, but choice;” (3) addiction is connected to the reward system in the brain. Partington makes the difference between reward and pleasure, emphasizing that pleasure is rarely the appeal of addictive behaviour. Often the opposite is true, where the goal is to eliminate the pain; (4) addiction is acquired as a result of engaging in the behaviour. Using addictive substances and engaging in addictive behaviours does not automatically result in addiction. A person may be more or less vulnerable to addiction, and an activity or a substance has the potential to become addictive. It is the slow, step by step, “ominous dance” that leads to the development of addiction, argues Partington; (5) harm is at the core of the definition of substance use disorder, as mentioned in DSM-5, “Addictions do immense harm to the body, mind, spirit, and relationships” (p.96). Addiction makes promises impossible to keep, and they mimic solutions instead of offering them.

Partington continues to explore the roots of this “nearly unstoppable force for self-harm” that devastates families, communities, and societies. He explores the factors involved in a person’s choices that lead to addiction, paying attention to neurobiology and neuroscience of addiction.

Part Three: Hope in Addiction

The recovery process is rarely fast or linear, and there is no “one-size-fits-all” path to overcoming addiction. Addiction stories are often multigenerational but also recovery has echoes across generations. The impact of recovery goes deep, far and

wide, and it is hard to measure it. Drawing from experts like Gabor Mate and Mark Lewis, Partington brings realistic hope for recovery from addiction. In his view, “recovery is an arduous journey, fraught with danger, that is best not tackled alone” (p.142). It requires concerted effort to overcome the grip of addiction. Loved ones and community hold the hope for recovery, a vision for the future and confidence that change is possible. The hope starts with the church family: “amid darkness, despair and agitation, these are people of peace creating a place of light and hope” (p.146) - rooted in the gospel of Jesus Christ. For hope, Partington turns to Jesus’ message quoting John 10:10: “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that you may have life, and have it to the full” followed by the message in Matthew 11:28-30 “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

Narrating transformative experiences, Partington concludes that the gospel of Jesus has power to transform his people from slaves into sons and daughters of the living God, offering real hope, deep satisfaction, healing and wholeness.

Partington concludes his book with real and concrete support for church communities who want to take this challenge seriously. He is not prescribing simple, one-size-fits-all solutions, but he offers clear guidance: (1) pursuing a deeper relationship with God. “Being God-adjacent isn’t enough. Our churches must be God-connected communities that lead us his people into a vital, genuine, life-giving relationship with Him” (p.165); (2) practice of spiritual habits (silence, solitude, sabbath, simplicity, fasting, and a daily patterns of prayer and meditation on Scripture); (3) pursuing a richer relationship with each other, moving closer and going deeper, as a means of “addiction-proofing” selves, children and community; (4) give space in our churches to those with experience of addiction and recovery. Partington suggests appointing a recovery “champion” who would play an important role in church leadership, bridging a connection with other services and the wider community. “Recovery champions may help guide the whole church community as it reflects on difficult questions, such as how we relate to alcohol in social settings or how to best support a member who relapsed” (p. 170); (5) Partington challenges his readers to re-think the church’s approach to small groups, asking the question: “would our small groups be more effective if they looked more like AA, mimicking its vulnerability, directness and urgency?” (p.172).

Partington concludes his book with six realistic things that churches can do to respond to the challenges and opportunities brought by the epidemic of addiction: (1) engage with the addiction issue; (2) gain a better understanding of addiction and recovery; (3) establish strong partnerships with addiction professionals and services in the wider community; (4) understand the role churches can play in addiction

prevention and recovery, by researching the need in the immediate community and then taking that role seriously; (5) sensitively reach out to those enslaved by addiction to bring them God's hope that they can become children of the living God, belonging to His family and community; (6) go deeper with God and with one another.

Partington offers his passion, his heart, and his vision to bring hope and new life to families and individuals caught in the grip of addiction. Throughout his book, using real life experiences of struggle and transformation, he empowers leaders and local churches to reconsider their view and approach of addiction in their communities. His goal, both within the book and in his work with Novo Communities, is to create transformational communities that offer healing, wholeness and hope.

Considering the current addiction epidemic, Christians cannot ignore Partington's book. He answers important questions and offers practical advice to churches and Christian communities all over the world. Now it is up to them to respond to the challenge. I highly recommend a book that brings hope in addiction. "Hope for freedom, restoration, a fresh start, and a different ending. Hope for now and hope for eternity. Recovery is possible" (p.185).

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