

by Michelle Kelley, LCSW

# Addicted to Chaos

*the holidays should be a time for family and friends, make sure your holiday is full of cheer instead of stress.*

We all know that alcohol, drugs, gambling, and sex can lead to addictive behavior. But did you know that living in chaos is an emerging and increasingly common addiction as well?

If you know any drama queens, kings, or other people who love to “stir the pot,” they could be living case examples of “chaos addiction.” According to one poll, 68% of Americans are addicted to some sort of chaos or busyness. Add the demands of holiday shopping, party planning and celebrations to the mix, and chaos addiction can become even more pronounced at this time of year, robbing us of the very joy and peace that we seek to experience during the holiday season.

## What Is Chaos Addiction?

“Chaos addiction” is a relatively new psychological term that refers to living in a constant state of chaos, turmoil, tension or drama. Alcoholics and drug addicts often live in a chronic state of chaos, but many sober people are succumbing to this life style as well. Chaos addiction can be emotionally destructive and create havoc in relationships.

All addictions offer escape and refuge from life’s stresses and problems. People who are addicted to chaos may be trying to distract themselves from experiencing something painful: a bad relationship, feelings of unworthiness or traumatic memories from childhood, for example.

## Changing Chaotic Behavior

Changing one’s chaotic behavior is not easy. To start, a chaos addict must admit they have a problem. They must have a strong desire to change destructive behaviors and consciously choose to adopt new habits. They must

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slow down and stop doing so much, and this can feel very uncomfortable.

The chaos addict's path to healing may involve mindfulness practices and counseling. While all change is difficult at first, the payoff is a calmer, more peaceful life filled with meaningful relationships and experiences.

### **Technology's Role in Chaos Addiction**

Round-the-clock access to computers, cell phones and the internet are contributing to the rise of chaos addiction in today's society. While technology enables us to stay connected 24/7, obtain and deliver information nearly instantaneously and exponentially increase our productivity at work and at school, it also presents challenges to those who have a hard time establishing and enforcing boundaries.

Technology is seductive. We all know people who are reluctant to unplug, turn off, silence or walk away from their computers and their cell phones. The constant state of being plugged in and turned on reinforces and aggravates chaos addiction.

### **Symptoms of Chaos Addiction**

Many of my clients are either struggling with a chaos

addiction or they are affected by someone who has such an addiction. I, too, have allowed myself at times to get sucked into the fast lane or lured into unconscious "busy-ness." Mothers, especially, can find themselves multitasking constantly to manage their households, children's school activities, and their own jobs as well. While compulsive multitasking can feel like a necessary and unavoidable part of life, we need to remember that we do have choices and it all begins with awareness.

You may be suffering from chaos addiction if you answer "yes" to the following questions:

- Do you have trouble saying "no" to people and requests?
- Does your life feel over-scheduled?
- Do you feel panicked and anxious, yet still feel the need to accomplish?
- Does your To Do list rule your life?
- Are you constantly too busy to make time for friends and family?

### **Quiet Time: The First Step to Managing Chaos Addiction**

Do you know how to be quiet? In today's world it can be an incredible challenge to "stay in the calm." Chaos and drama can creep into your life without you realizing what has happened. Too many demands on your time or interacting with toxic people will drain you of your patience and your peace of mind.

Taking time out every day to simply be quiet and alone with yourself so you can pay attention to what you are thinking and feeling, without outside distractions, is a first step to managing chaos addiction.

Women, especially, need to learn to take a time out so they can be "good to themselves." This means giving yourself permission to have downtime, fun time or special time, without feeling selfish or guilty. Many women silently fear they will be perceived as selfish. Taking care of yourself is not selfish. The calmer you are, the less likely you are to yell, snap at someone, feel irritated or short-fused -- and that is good for everyone around you.

### **The Health Consequences of Chaos Addiction**

Excessive drama and chaos can trigger the body's stress response, releasing destructive hormones that can wreak havoc on your mind and body. A constant stream of chaos and drama in your life will trigger the fight-or-flight response in your body. When your mind and body are not able to experience adequate and regular reprieves from the fight-or-flight response, you increase your risk of developing anxiety, depression, digestive problems, sleep problems, weight gain and memory/concentration impairment.

### **How to Minimize the Chaos**

- Identify stress-producing behavior or stress-producing people in your life, then create a plan to limit these behaviors or exposure to these people.
- Set limits. Create boundaries to keep you calm and the chaos out.

- Focus on creating a healthy lifestyle which includes adequate sleep, exercise and healthy food choices.
- Make a conscious decision to attract calm into your life, not chaos.

## How to Minimize Chaos During the Holidays.

Ask Yourself These Questions:

- Do you spend too much money during the holidays? If so, consider sticking to a holiday spending budget.
- Have a family meeting to discuss holiday stress. Ask for suggestions on how to reduce the stress/anxiety/chaos of the season.
- Schedule down time or fun family time. This could be something as simple as pizza night or game night.
- Turn off technology for one hour or more each day with the focus being on spending quality time together. Staying plugged in too much can add to your overall stress level. Set boundaries with technology and help your children do the same. For example, do not answer email after 7pm or on weekends.

Albert Einstein reminds us that the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results. In order to get out of a rut or change a behavior pattern, you must consciously choose to change and practice new and different behaviors. If you suspect you are addicted to chaos, then practicing mindful self-awareness, slowing down, unplugging from technology and setting time aside each day to be quiet and spend quality time with the ones you love can help.

### Additional Resources

From Chaos To Calm in 30 Days is a self-paced home study course created especially for parents who feel overwhelmed by the chaos in their home and family life. For more information, visit: [Mommy-zen.com/chaos2calm](http://Mommy-zen.com/chaos2calm).

Michelle Kelley, LCSW, is a licensed counselor and the owner of Girls Stand Strong in Warrenton. Michelle helps girls and women develop the self-confidence and self-esteem they need to achieve their goals and realize their dreams. Through her speaking engagements, workshops, and counseling—Michelle provides girls and women with the essential tools to select and cultivate healthy friendships and relationships. Such positive relationships foster a strong emotional well-being and successful social lives. Please visit [www.GirlsStandStrong.com](http://www.GirlsStandStrong.com) or call 703.505.2413 for additional information.



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