

Helping Young Adults Overcome Addictions

A Framework from 1 John · by Dr. Luke Trifilio, Biblical Counseling Center

Understanding the Landscape (5 min)

Addiction is not disappearing — it is expanding and shifting. The object of addiction is changing more than the reality of addiction itself.

■ Increasing	■ Stabilizing / Declining
Digital / screen addiction Online gambling / sports betting Pornography, gaming, social media Hard drugs (opioids, fentanyl)	Alcohol use disorder Teen cigarette / tobacco use Some overdose death rates

Among young people the pattern is striking: less traditional substance use, more behavioral and digital addiction, continued vulnerability to hard drugs and opioids.

What Is Addiction? (5 min)

Addiction is a compulsive dependence on a substance, behavior, or experience that a person continues to pursue despite harmful consequences to their health, relationships, or responsibilities. Most definitions share five core elements:

- **Loss of control** — cannot consistently limit or stop
- **Craving / preoccupation** — significant mental energy consumed by the behavior
- **Tolerance** — increasing amounts needed for the same effect
- **Withdrawal** — distress when the behavior is reduced or stopped
- **Continuation despite consequences** — persists even when it causes harm

Biblically, addiction is: Enslavement (Romans 6) · Idolatry (1 John 5:21) · Deceptive (Jeremiah 17:9) · Progressive (James 1:14–15)

***Key Insight:** Addiction is worship disordered — when something other than God becomes the ruling comfort, identity, or escape.*

Teach Two Kingdoms — young adults resonate with freedom language: Worship God → Freedom | Worship Desire → Slavery

“You think this gives you freedom. It’s actually narrowing your life.”

Young Adults & Addiction (5 min)

Young adulthood (18–30) is identity-forming, independence-seeking, spiritually unstable, and emotionally intense. Addictions in this stage are rarely just about pleasure.

What They Face	What They’re Seeking	Common Idols	The Real Craving
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Porn saturation · Vape + weed normalization · Alcohol as social glue · Gaming as escape · Social media loops	Belonging · Anxiety relief · Identity · Escape from pressure · Comfort in loneliness	Acceptance · Sexual fulfillment · Control · Comfort · Excitement	They are not primarily craving a substance. They are craving relief.
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The Addiction Cycle — understanding the cycle helps counselors and counsees identify intervention points:

Trigger → **Desire** → Rationalization → Act → Relief → **Shame** → **Isolation** → Repeat

Insert the Gospel at three points:

- **Desire** → God provides a way of escape (1 Cor 10:13)
- **Shame** → Confession restores (1 John 1:9)
- **Isolation** → The church is essential (Hebrews 10:24–25)

The 1 John Framework (20 min)

The pastoral pathway of 1 John offers five movements for helping young adults move from enslavement to freedom. These are not sequential steps but overlapping postures of the heart.

Maxim	Key Text	Counseling Focus
Walk in the Light	“If we walk in the light as he is in the light...” 1 Jn 1:7	Honesty, repentance, end of secrecy
Practice Truth	“We know that we have come to know him if we keep his commands.” 1 Jn 2:3	Expose self-deception, clarify heart desires
Keep the Word	“...his word is not in us.” 1 Jn 1:8	Restructure daily life under Christ’s authority
Love Response	“Whoever loves his brother abides in the light.” 1 Jn 2:10	Reorient heart outward — God and others
Live Through Christ	“Whoever abides in him does not keep on sinning.” 1 Jn 3:6	Ongoing dependence on Christ, not self-effort

1. Walk in the Light

Addiction flourishes in darkness. The first movement toward freedom is honesty — before God and at least one trusted believer. Walking in the light is not a demand for perfection but a posture of openness.

Questions that bring hidden patterns forward:

- When are you most tempted?
- What usually leads up to the behavior?
- Who knows about this struggle?
- What are you seeking in that moment?

Remove provision:

- Delete apps · Block websites · Change routines
- Avoid environments · Eliminate secrecy

Counselor Tone: *Calm, compassionate clarity. Questions are not designed to shame — they illuminate. The goal is to step out of isolation and into truth, where grace can be meaningfully applied.*

2. Practice Truth

Self-deception is one of the most powerful forces sustaining addiction. Individuals minimize, rationalize, and normalize — obscuring the seriousness of sin and preventing meaningful change.

Instead of asking “Do you have a problem?” ask:

- “What do you turn to when you’re stressed?”
- “What feels hardest to live without?”
- “What does this give you? What does it help you avoid?”

Common lies that sustain addiction:

- “I’m just a porn guy.” / “That’s just how I cope.”
- “I can stop whenever I want.”
- “I am already condemned.”

Replace with:

- Romans 6–8 identity study
- Ephesians 1–3 union with Christ

Target the heart (Prov 4:23) — *addiction begins in desire before it becomes behavior.*

3. Keep the Word

Insight alone does not produce transformation. Many people clearly understand the harm of their behavior and sincerely desire change, yet remain trapped because their daily structure still accommodates the addiction.

Put off / Put on:

- Remove provision — eliminate access, restructure environments, establish accountability
- Replace with life-giving alternatives — exercise, service, community, Scripture rhythms
- Establish repeatable obedience — not occasional willpower but structured daily patterns

Key Principle: *Addiction thrives where life is governed by impulse and secrecy. Freedom begins when a person orders daily life under the wisdom and commands of Christ.*

4. Love Response

Addiction narrows a person's world — turning attention inward toward personal relief and escape. Love expands the heart outward toward God and others. A renewed capacity to love is essential to lasting transformation.

Practical application:

- Encourage small, consistent acts of love and service
- Re-embed the individual in shared life — church, family, friendship
- Service redirects attention away from self-monitoring toward meaningful contribution

As the counselee receives Christ's love and extends it to others, the emotional appeal of escape-driven behavior gradually diminishes. Purpose expands beyond relief.

5. Live Through Christ

Lasting freedom is not achieved through willpower alone. It is sustained through ongoing dependence upon Christ — drawing strength, identity, and direction from union with Him rather than from self-effort.

Address identity confusion directly:

- Many young adults define themselves by their struggles: "This is just who I am."
- Identity must shift: from "one who is mastered" to "one who belongs to Christ."
- This shift happens through truth, not positive thinking.

Daily dependence is practiced through:

- Prayer and Scripture in moments of temptation
- A consistent community of accountability
- Repeated turning toward Christ rather than striving in isolation

The Goal: *Not a person who never struggles — but a person who runs to Christ when they do.*

■ **Discussion:** *Where do young adults in your church most seem to be seeking relief, belonging, or identity through addictive behaviors? What would walking in the light look like for them?*

Common Presenting Addictions (5 min)

Type	Root Dynamic	Primary Counseling Response
Pornography	Hyper-normalized; shame-driven secrecy	Aggressive digital restructuring; walk in the light immediately
Alcohol	Often tied to belonging and social identity	Replace with meaningful community; address identity in Christ
Gaming	Escape + achievement substitute; avoidance of failure	Rebuild purpose; address anxiety and achievement theology
Weed / Vaping	Often anxiety-driven; normalized as harmless	Address anxiety theology; teach Spirit-dependent coping

Reflective Questions for Lay Counselors (5 min)

Use as many or as few as time allows. Even one or two asked slowly can shape the room.

- Where am I currently seeing addiction or addictive patterns among the young adults God has placed around me? What am I noticing beneath the surface behaviors?
- When I think about the young people in our church, what do they most seem to be seeking — relief, belonging, identity, escape, control, or comfort?
- Do I tend to focus primarily on behavior management, or on shepherding the heart toward Christ? What might need to change?
- In my conversations with struggling young adults, do I ask questions that uncover desire and worship, or do I stay mostly at the surface?
- How can our church become a place where young adults experience meaningful belonging that competes with the pull of addictive behaviors?
- Do I personally model a life of walking in the light and living in dependence upon Christ? Where might the Lord be inviting my own growth?

The goal is not merely sobriety — it is Christlikeness.

As individuals learn to walk in the light, practice truth, keep the Word, love others, and live through Christ, their lives gradually expand beyond the narrow confines of addiction toward freedom and mature participation in the life of Christ and His people.