Emotional Sobriety: An Important Piece of the Puzzle for Optimal Recovery

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“Recovery is and demands change. Recovery means things have to be different than they were. It means that I have to be different than I was (p.46 - 1985) *Stage II Recovery.*”

**Emotional Sobriety and Emotional Maturity**
“...maturing is the transcendence from environmental support to self-support. (p.28).”


The Problem

Life happens and we object.
The Objection

Life isn’t what it’s supposed to be.

"Where a person experiences a loss or trauma in childhood that undermines his sense of security and self-acceptance, he would project into his image of the future the requirement that it reverse the experiences of the past."

“Desperation creates illusions - illusions create desperation.”

Alexander Lowen, M.D.

“Many men and women carry into adulthood so much unfinished business from childhood and so many unresolved conflicts that they enter into the arena of intimate relationships with terrible handicaps. Blind to their own incapacities, they count on love to perform a miracle. When the miracle doesn’t happen, they blame love. Or they blame their partner.”

“If our freedom depends exclusively on another person allowing it, we lose our own sense of the part we must exercise in protecting and defining our own psychological space…”

Erving and Miriam Polster, Ph.D.

“Life is not what it’s supposed to be. It is what it is. The way you cope with it, is what makes the difference.”

Virginia Satir, Ph.D.
Many people in recovery …
“have made a First Step relative to their addiction, but have not made a First Step relative to the living problems that underlies all addictions and ultimately limits their ability to function in loving relationships.”

Fred Holmquist describes this experience as “sober suffering.”
Step 12

“Here we begin to practice all of the Twelve Steps of the program in our daily lives so that we and those about us can find emotional sobriety.”

I think many oldsters who have put our 'booze cure' to severe but successful tests still find they often lack emotional sobriety. Perhaps they will be the spearhead for the next major development in AA, the development of much more real maturity and balance (which is to say, humility) in our relations with ourselves, with our fellows, and with God.

Those adolescent urges that so many of us have for top approval, perfect security, and perfect romance, urges quite appropriate to age seventeen, prove to be an impossible way of life when we are at age forty-seven and fifty-seven.
Since AA began, I've taken immense wallops in all these areas because of my failure to grow up emotionally and spiritually. My God, how painful it is to keep demanding the impossible, and how very painful to discover, finally, that all along we had the cart before the horse. Then comes the final agony of seeing how awfully wrong we have been, but still finding ourselves unable to get off the emotional merry-go-round.

How to translate a right mental conviction into a right emotional result, and so into easy, happy and good living. Well, that's not only the neurotics problem, it's the problem of life itself for all of us who have got to the point of real willingness to hew to right principles in all of our affairs.
Even then, as we hew away, peace and joy may still elude us. That's the place so many AA oldsters have come to. And it's a hell of a spot, literally. How shall our unconscious, from which so many of our fears, compulsions and phony aspirations still stream, be brought into line with what we actually believe, know and want! How to convince our dumb, raging and hidden Mr. Hyde becomes our main task.

I've recently come to believe that this can be achieved. I believe so because I begin to see many benighted ones, folks like you and me, commencing to get results.

Last autumn, depression, having no really rational cause at all, almost took me to the cleaners. I began to be scared that I was in for another long chronic spell. Considering the grief I've had with depressions, it wasn't a bright prospect.
I kept asking myself, ‘Why can’t the Twelve Steps work to release depression?’ By the hour, I stared at the St. Francis Prayer … ‘it’s better to comfort than to be comforted.’ Here was the formula all right, but why didn’t it work?

Suddenly, I realized what the matter was. My basic flaw had always been dependence, almost absolute dependence, on people or circumstances to supply me with prestige, security, and the like. Failing to get these things according to my perfectionist dreams and specifications, I had fought for them. And when defeat came, so did my depression.
There wasn’t a chance of making the outgoing love of St. Francis a workable and joyous way of life until these fatal and almost absolute dependencies were cut away.

Because I had over the years undergone a little spiritual development, the absolute quality of these frightful dependencies had never before been so starkly revealed.

Reinforced by what grace I could secure in prayer, I found I had to exert every ounce of will and action to cut off these faulty emotional dependencies upon people, upon AA, indeed upon any act or circumstance whatsoever.

Then could I be free to love as Francis did. Emotional and instinctual satisfactions, I saw, were really the extra dividends of having love, offering love, and expressing love appropriate to each relation of life.
Emotional Sobriety: The Next Frontier by Bill Wilson (1958)

Plainly, I could not avail myself to God's love until I was able to offer it back to Him by loving others as He would have me. And I couldn't possibly do that so long as I was victimized by false dependencies.

For my dependencies meant demand, a demand for the possession and control of the people and the conditions surrounding me. While those words 'absolute dependence' may look like a gimmick, they were the ones that helped to trigger my release into my present degree of stability and quietness of mind, qualities which I am now trying to consolidate by offering love to others regardless of the return to me.

Emotional Sobriety: The Next Frontier by Bill Wilson (1958)

This seems to be the primary healing circuit: an outgoing love of God's creation and His people, by means of which we avail ourselves of His love for us. It is most clear that the real current can't flow until our paralyzing dependencies are broken, and broken at depth. Only then can we possibly have a glimmer of what adult love really is.
Emotional Sobriety: The Next Frontier by Bill Wilson (1958)

If we examine every disturbance we have, great or small, we will find at the root of it some unhealthy dependence and its consequent demand. Let us, with God's help, continually surrender these hobbling demands. Then we can be set free to live and love: we may then be able to gain emotional sobriety.

Emotional Sobriety: The Next Frontier by Bill Wilson (1958)

Of course I haven't offered you a really new idea only a gimmick that has started to unhook several of my own "hexes" at depth. Nowadays, my brain no longer races compulsively in either elation, grandiosity, or depression. I have been given a quiet place in bright sunshine.
"Emotional Sobriety is the result of an appropriate balance and coordination of all that we are. It is when the best in us does the thinking and talking for the rest of us.

This state of mind is achieved when we let go of what we think life is supposed to be and instead cope with whatever challenges life sets before us.

It is when what we do becomes the determining force in our emotional well being rather than allowing our emotional well being to be overly influenced by external events or by what others are or are not doing."

Allen Berger, Ph.D. - 2019
“We had to learn ourselves and, furthermore, we had to teach the despairing men, that it did not really matter what we expected from life, but rather what life expected from us......we needed to think of ourselves as those who were being questioned by life... Life ultimately means taking the responsibility to find the right answer to its problems and to fulfill the tasks which it constantly sets for each individual.”

Viktor E. Frankl (1959). Man’s Search for Meaning.

Emotional sobriety creates a true independence of emotions and spirit.
Emotional Sobriety and Our Emotional Center of Gravity

The Shift in the Location of the Emotional Center of Gravity in Emotional Sobriety

I'm OK if _______?
I'm OK even if _______?
Emotional Sobriety is
Living in the Space
Between the Stimulus
and Response

“There’s a space between the Stimulus and our Response. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom - try to live there.”

Viktor Frankl, M.D.

The Essence of Emotional Sobriety
Emotional Sobriety Lives Here

- Autonomy
- Individuality
- Holding on to Yourself
- Soothing and Supporting Yourself
- Keeping a Physical, Emotional and Spiritual Balance
- Maintaining Your Emotional Center of Gravity
- Validating Yourself
- Having Flexibility in your Response-Ability
- Letting the Best of You Run the Show

Emotional Sobriety Means Taking Radical Responsibility
“So long as an individual cannot accept the fact of what he is, cannot permit himself to be fully aware of it, cannot fully admit the truth into his consciousness, he cannot move beyond that point: if he denies the reality of his condition, he cannot proceed to alter it, cannot achieve healthy changes in his personality.

(p. 110 - The Disowned Self)”

Dr. Nathaniel Branden

“Self-responsibility begins with the recognition that I am ultimately responsible for my own existence; that no one else is here on earth to serve me, to take care of me, or fill my needs.”

"If responsibility and blame are fused in our minds, then our defenses will marshal to avoid any responsibility. However, the self-contempt of blame is quite different from the self-empowerment of responsibility. By suspending self-blame, we can look more calmly and soberly at how we may be responsible for our choices and accountable for our actions. Only then will we become wiser and stronger. Only then can we grow emotionally and spiritually."

John Amodeo, Ph.D.
Love and Betrayal (1994).

Emotional Sobriety Requires Us to Let Go of Our Unenforceable Rules
One of the truly basic problems is that our society bases the marital relationship almost completely on love and then imposes demands on it that love can never solely fulfill.

• If you love me you won’t do anything without me.
• If you love me you’ll do what I say.
• If you love me you’ll give me what I want.
• If you love me you’ll know what I want before I ask.

These kinds of practices soon make love into a kind of blackmail, I call the clutch.”

Virginia Satir (1972) - Peoplemaking.
“Expectations lead to the erosion of any relationship. The myth that the resolution of loneliness will result because we have found an intimate one-on-one relationship is a cop out. It begins a toxic process which dissipates the mutual nourishment that occurs when both people are committed to sustaining nourishing interaction and growth of their separate selves.”


“When men and women do not attain psychological adulthood, the danger is that unconsciously they expect others to assume responsibility for their existence, especially for their emotional life.”

Emotional Sobriety involves Aiming for the Best Possible Attitude Towards Life

“Your program cannot take you further than your definition of recovery.”

Earnie Larsen
Step 10

Finally we begin to see that all people, including ourselves, are to some extent emotional ill as well as frequently wrong and then we approach true tolerance and see what real love for our fellows actually means. It will become more and more evident as we go forward that it is pointless to become angry or to get hurt by people, who like us, are suffering from the pains of growing up.


“....sobriety is only the bare beginning. It is only the first gift of the first awakening. If more gifts are to be received, our awakening has to go on. And if it does go on, we find that bit by bit by bit we can discard the old life – the one that didn’t work – for a new life that can and does work under any conditions whatever. Regardless of worldly success or failure, regardless of pain or joy, regardless of sickness or health or even of death itself, a new life of endless possibilities can be lived if we are willing to continue our awakening.”

Bill Wilson (1957).
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