

Switching from One Addiction to Another

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I am an alcoholic and in 1982 I gave up drinking. I come from a family of alcoholics and I was the first to recover. I did well in Alcoholics Anonymous for about a year when my father died and I was really overwhelmed by my grief. My sponsor said that in recovery you have to process your feelings not drink over them. So I stayed sober but I did act out. Instead of drinking I turned to obsessing about a man I met at a meeting.

After a tumultuous relationship that went nowhere my sponsor suggested that I leave this man and I couldn't. That is when I discovered that I had a new addiction. I was addicted to this man.

When things finally ended I turned to food. I started eating non-stop and gained a hundred pounds. I switched to bulimia to control my weight and then lost control of that. I ended up anorexic and in the hospital. When I got out of the hospital I loved my new skinny body and wanted new clothes. I started shopping and could not stop.

Eventually I opened my eyes to the fact that I was switching from one addiction to another rather than dealing with my underlying issues which included depression and unresolved feelings from growing up in an alcoholic home.

Today, I am in recovery and I have discovered that I am not alone. Most of the people around me have started substituting one bad habit for another and are running the risk of developing a new addiction.

To help myself and others avoid this trap I offer the following guidelines to treat the underlying issues that come up in recovery.

1. Admit that we have underlying issues. Nothing can change until we acknowledge that we have a problem. This is the First Step in Alcoholics Anonymous. Like the step suggests, it helps to admit that we are powerless for now and need help. Take the time to announce this at a meeting or to your Sponsor. Most of all be fearlessly honest with yourself and be humble. I believe that "pride goes before a fall," and after a fall as well. Pride has no place at this crucial time of our life.

2. Identify the underlying issues. If we do not remember our childhood we can look at photographs, talk to siblings, friends or our parents who knew us as a child. Meditate or analyze our dreams. The truth will come out if we want it to. Once I was willing to remember, I started having flashbacks. Here is a list of underlying issues to choose from:

- o chronic insecurity
- o chronic anxiety
- o depression
- o feelings of alienation
- o loneliness
- o a profound hunger for love
- o an exaggerated fear of abandonment and rejection
- o feelings of deprivation
- o feelings of emptiness
- o confusion or fear when love is available
- o anxiety when things are going well
- o some kind of addiction

3. Talk about what we remember. Talk at closed meetings. Talk with our Sponsor. Talk to a therapist. Talk to a friend. Find someone we can trust and who can either sympathize or even empathize with what we have gone through. Don't stop talking until we have emptied out our pain. Do not for a minute think we are talking too much or bothering someone. We are in recovery. This exercise is not a conversation. We do not have to ask how our listener is feeling. We have to talk and let things we have forgotten seep up from our unconscious mind.

4. Write in our journal about what we are discovering. As we write, marvelous things we have forgotten will spill out onto the page. This can be a personal journal or we can share it with others. My journal, which I started in 1982, became the draft of my first book *Addiction to Love*. We must pour our heart out onto the page and further this process of discovery.

5. Feel all of our emotions as they come up without drinking or using other unhealthy mood-altering experiences. Addicts don't like to feel painful emotions. We like to self-medicate or distract ourselves. We like to hide our feelings or stuff them or lash out at others to release them. Do not let shame stop us from feeling the emotions. There is no emotion that should be ashamed of. Even if we did something we regret because of our feelings, we can deal with that when we get to the Ninth Step. For now we must just feel. This was the very first thing I heard at my very first meeting in Alcoholics Anonymous. My sponsor said, "If we want to recover we have to feel our feelings." I did and it hurt, and now I am passing on this information to all so we can recover.

6. Grieve what we went through. If we can't do this directly, imagine that our inner child was hurt, and do for him/her what we cannot do for ourselves. Grieving is similar to my suggestion above. We feel the loss of our childhood. We wish we had not suffered so much. We wish we could have had loving parents. We want what we did not have because we were just a little child and deserved more.

7. Get angry for awhile if we have spent a lifetime suppressing our emotions. This is an important step in the process. It is part of letting go. When we get angry we are being honest. We are not making excuses for our parents. We are feeling what all children need to feel to survive and yet were not allowed to feel. For more about anger, see Susan Anderson's book: *The Journey from Abandonment and Healing*.

8. Do not get lost in the anger. Anger is a "double edged sword." It is part of the process, not the process itself. As soon as we are able, move on and put this all into perspective. Were the people who hurt us abused or neglected? What about their grandparents? If we are a parent did we pass down the pain to our children to ease our own burdens. I did . . .

9. After we put things into perspective, consider forgiving these people. To forgive means to let go of resentment. We do not have to like them, associate with them, or let them continue to hurt us. This suggestion is controversial. I talk about this in my book, *The Art of Changing*. Some professionals say it is not necessary or might even be harmful. AA says it is an absolute imperative. I believe it is important. Nothing changed in my life until I forgave my mother. I could not forgive myself before I forgave her. This happened when I discovered that my mother was mentally ill, and could not care for me. It took the sting out. I thought she neglected me on purpose. Her time in the mental hospital was kept from me. What John Bradshaw called a "toxic secret."

10. Accept what happened to us. How do we do this? We can't do it right away. We can't do it when we want to. We can't do it while we are in the angry stage. We will do it when we are ready. We can push ourselves a little, but balance this with patience. Tell ourselves: these were the cards we were dealt. Maybe something good will come out of this. (I became a teacher because of what happened to me.) According to AA: "Acceptance is the answer to all our problems today. When I am disturbed, it is because I find some person, place, thing or situation--some fact of my life--unacceptable to me, and I can find no serenity until I accept this person, place, thing or situation as being exactly the way it is supposed to be at this moment.

11. Move on. This is the fun part. We drop all of this. We create a new life. We embrace our present and dream about the future. We live our life of abundance. Of course, the past will come back to haunt us now and then because this is the way the brain works, especially when we go home for the holidays--to the scene of the crime. However, as time goes on the pain of the past will lessen and come up less often to disrupt our new life in recovery.

12. Take care of ourselves. Do for ourselves what our parents could not or would not do. What this means is a little pampering, forgiving ourselves, and having fun.

13. Be grateful for this process that is going to free us, change us, and bring us a brighter tomorrow. Gratitude, according to my first Sponsor, is another AA imperative. It takes us

out of our own misery. If we don't feel grateful, "act as if." Fake it until we make it. [Don't we love AA slogans?] Once we discover how "we can be" grateful even when we don't "feel" grateful we will never stop.

14. Celebrate our victories and hard work. Use our imagination. What did we do when we graduated or got married or even won the lottery? Celebrate our recovery as well. Celebrate God if we are a believer.

15. Pass all of this on to the next poor soul looking for help—anyway we can. This is why I started writing and teaching. It is fun and good for my self-esteem. This is the 12th step and while touted as a suggestion, it is like suggesting we put on a parachute when we jump out of a plane.

Remember that we cannot do this alone. The steps in Alcoholic Anonymous use the word "we" for a reason. We can seek help in a 12-Step program. We can go to therapy. We can ask a friend to help us. The only requirement is that this person be an enlightened witness—someone who will have compassion and understanding about our addictions and our struggle to get better.