

Befriending Middle Ground in Sustained Recovery from Addiction

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Early recovery is spent in trying to interrupt the momentum of the addiction to achieve sustained abstinence. Most of the mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual energy is spent on that goal. In sustained recovery, the recovering person is now able to use more of their energy not only cleaning up the debris from their addiction, but being able to consciously move toward being the person that they have wanted to be. Some of the tasks of sustained recovery involve developing balance in one's life, and changing up old, dysfunctional behavior patterns. Many dysfunctional behavior patterns are based on a fabric of cognitive distortions. Much of the cognitive distortions that plague alcoholics and addicts originate in their families of origin.

Alcoholics, addicts, and other folks that grow up in dysfunctional families seem to have a tendency to think and behave in extremes. Many have come from family systems that exhibit extremes in their behavior and functioning. One of the most consistent observations that I have made of alcoholic families is a tendency to move back and forth from enmeshment to disengagement, prompted by some level of conflict or crisis.

Although a recovering person is now sober, s/he may retain the extremes in thinking and behavior. Much of this can be seen in "all or none", "black or white" thinking. There is no such thing as "moderation". There certainly was no moderation in alcohol or other drug use. And in recovery, there is often a lack of awareness of the existence of "middle ground".

In working with couples in recovery, I commonly observe extreme emotional reactions in responses to seemingly innocuous requests or statements. An example would be the statement, "I don't like it when you come to bed at 1:00 a.m. and wake me up getting into bed". The over the top response is, "Ok, then I will sleep in the guest room from here on out." Another example might be a request from an employer to communicate more about things going on in the office and the recovering person decides to quit. Nothing anywhere near middle ground is considered without a great deal of work to see that, "yes, Virginia, there really is a middle ground". A similar dynamic is seen when someone who is usually passive is trying to learn to be assertive. In an opportunity to practice new behavior, they go way past assertive into aggressive in a blink of an eye and believe they have been assertive. A very common example is the newly recovering family member who is trying to stop "enabling". They confuse enabling for any level of "assistance" including common courtesy (i.e., opening the door for someone is equated with enabling).

Recovering people who are attempting to replace old behavior with new living skills often swing back and forth between extremes. With the example of assertiveness: When a person with a passive or passive aggressive style identifies a need to learn to stand up for their rights, to set boundaries (and other self-care) or to be direct in what they want and need, they often equate "Be assertive" with "Nuke 'em". The passive, people-pleasing person jumps to the extreme polar opposite, becoming belligerent and demanding. When that does not go over well with their family system (or any other system, for that matter), they quickly move back to passive people-pleasing, until they get fed up again and move back to aggression. They move back and forth from polar opposites, with middle ground being a blur between the two. A similar situation happens

when recovering parents are trying to change how they provide discipline and guidance to the kids. They know that what they have been doing is not healthy or is not working. So they do the opposite. The kids are confused. Those that have no desire to change are in opposition and conflicts ensue. The parent(s) trying to change returns to old behavior, until once again they are reminded that change in parenting is needed. They once again move to the polar opposite. They do not "naturally" consider that a more moderate change is possible. Extreme thinking says, "there is no middle ground". There is only "this" OR "that". The awareness of a need to replace old, counter therapeutic behavior with new more effective behavior does not come with a "How To" manual. The opposite "knee jerk" response is often the first solution generated.

If you think in "all or none", "black or white", all you can think of is the polar opposite. When you think like this, your position and the opposite position are the only possibilities. You become totally invested in the solution that you have come up with. You cannot conceive that any other solutions are possible. You perceive your solution to be right and the other's solution to be wrong. You cannot compromise, because it is not possible to do it any other way. With this line of thinking the other person just does not know or recognize the correctness of your position and must be convinced. When you think like this, you do not yield. You develop a "my way, or the highway" attitude.

This black or white thinking is not easy to live with, and many spouses and other family members will get to a point that they avoid you like the plague or they will purposely not ask your opinion, withhold information, and in general, try to work around you. It becomes a "no-win" situation to try to work with you.

Of course, when you are thinking from a black or white frame work, you need some psychological defense mechanisms to reduce the distress that this position brings, and to allow you to maintain this position. You may see disagreement with you or your position as a personal attack, rejection, or a lack of respect. You may say to yourself things like, "they don't like me", "they don't respect me", "they don't understand what I am trying to say/do/be and they are in my way". These defenses allow you to continue to perceive yourself to be "right", but they further divide you from your closeness with others that you secretly desire. Since there is no middle ground and your way of looking at things is the only possible way to see things, then others are "wrong", that their avoidance as a way of dealing with your errors in thinking is motivated by being "mean" and are due to their own character defects. You don't consider that your black and white thinking is problematic. Any body that sees things any other way is just "wrong".

People who perceive life in such extremes often have great difficulty connecting their behavior to their outcomes. They have a hard time attributing negative outcomes like, relationship problems, or negative results from emotionally based decisions on an inability to consider a middle ground approach to problem solving. They often cannot see that some of the negatives things that happen in life occur because of one's own decisions and behavior. Without a working relationship with "middle ground" you continue to handicap your growth and development.