

Addiction and Recovery
Don't Let Myths Keep You From Getting Sober
By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.

I keep hearing the same old myths over and over again. And I can't help but think that others hearing these myths either believe them and give up or use them for excuses to avoid taking action on getting clean and sober. One of the myths that I hear daily is that you can't get sober for someone else, that you have to want it for yourself, or your recovery efforts won't work. This statement is both true and false.

The idea that you can't get sober for someone else is completely wrong. People do it every day. Many people find their way into treatment centers, counselors' offices, and AA/NA rooms at the urging of someone else. Alcoholics and addicts are commonly coerced into abstinence and early recovery. Wives and husbands lay down bottom lines that they will leave the alcoholic and get a divorce if they don't quit drinking. Spouses are not the only ones doing the coercing. Employers, parents, judges/court system, and children have all influenced alcoholics/addicts into treatment and abstinence.

Initially, these stark raving sober people get that way doing it for someone else. They essentially do whatever is necessary at that moment to keep from losing whatever it is that they fear losing. Their early recovery efforts are "externally motivated".

A number of the events and characteristics of early abstinence can create the desire for sobriety. With abstinence from alcohol and other drugs, brains and bodies begin to detox. Taking it one day at a time, to do what is necessary to not drink/use that day, the sober alcoholic/addict's thinking begins to clear up. They begin to feel better. As they deal with situations that they used to use drugs over, a self-efficacy about being able to get and stay sober begins to develop. The negative impacts of the disease and the positive benefits of sobriety become obvious. It is now conceivable to the addict, that one's life course can be changed and that they can recover and be happy. Now they can start to see the benefits of sobriety.

They begin to actually begin to believe that it is possible to have a life without alcohol/drugs, something not conceivable before. If you can separate from the drug long enough, you can begin to believe that you can get sober. Addicts begin to experience some of the benefits of abstinence early on. Hope happens. As addicts in early recovery continue in meetings and begin to identify the negative impact of the using on various aspects of their lives, denial and other defense mechanisms are neutralized. More reality is getting through. Motivation becomes intrinsic. They will eventually be motivated to stay sober because they want their own positive outcomes.

So it is more accurate to say that people often get sober for someone else, but learn to stay sober for themselves. Desire for recovery is a necessary but insufficient factor in maintaining recovery.