

**Feelings Management:  
Learning Living Skills For Addiction Recovery  
By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.**

One of the most needed skills for recovery from alcoholism and other drug (AOD) addiction is the ability to appropriately process and manage emotions. The very absence of this skill is a common characteristic of addiction.

Alcoholics/addicts in active addiction, use the chemical as an affect regulation tool, sometimes almost exclusively. So, one of the first tasks of early recovery is to learn to appropriately navigate and manage the territory of negative sentiment without the use of "mood altering chemicals".

You can do the following three things with these pesky uncomfortable sentiments:

- 1) Stuff them;
- 2) Act them out;
- 3) Work through them.

1) How to stuff them: You can pour alcohol and other chemicals on them to numb them out. Use of other obsessive-compulsive behaviors also permits escape from uncomfortable affective states. Some of these behaviors include gambling addiction, sexual addiction, compulsive spending, compulsive eating, compulsive cleaning, or work addiction. Defense mechanisms that minimize, rationalize, intellectualize, ignore, justify, blame, and project responsibility also offer some relief by distorting reality. You can even hide them from yourself by quickly pairing them up. Stuffing feelings doesn't make them go away. They leak out around the edges in very unhealthy ways over time. They can sneak out in passive aggressive expressions of anger. Or they can get your attention by manifesting themselves in symptoms of depression or physical illnesses.

2) How to act out them out: Everyone is familiar with acting-out negative sentiments with temper tantrums, name-calling and other dirty fight techniques. Acting them out is not the same as releasing them. Acting out can only release some of the pressure driving the feeling. It does not release the actual feeling. So when you break a piece of pottery and feel momentary relief, it is because you have released some pressure or energy.

3) How to work through them: There are four steps in working through an uncomfortable emotion:

- a) Identify it;
- b) Own it;
- c) Express it;
- d) Practice pro-active problem solving on it.

"Working through" begins with identifying the feelings. If you think of them as problems to be solved, the first thing you do in problem solving is identify the problem. It is crucial to be able to accurately label your feelings. Otherwise the "working through" process will

be hindered. For example, imagine experiencing sadness and only having two labels for that experience -- (happy and mad) then trying to communicate sadness to your spouse or best friend. Your attempt would be unsuccessful because neither of those words (happy and mad) appropriately expresses the experience of sadness. It is important to be able to distinguish between and among emotions. Fear and anger seem very much alike in what our bodies experience when we have those emotions. Yet they are not the same. The confusion is further complicated by the fact that a number of emotions get paired up in our experience of them. Sometimes we move so quickly from one feeling into another less distressing one that we don't even recognize or remember the original one. A common pairing is hurt and anger. We often experience anger along with other emotions. It is often just as important to communicate the other emotions (if not more important), than the anger itself. So the first step in "working through" is to correctly identify and appropriately label them.

The second step is to own our own feelings, with "I feel". The distinction is important. With "I feel" you are taking ownership. When we say, "you make me feel", you perceive yourself to be a victim and at the mercy of others who are responsible for altering your affective experience. Since it is impossible for others to actually change our experience, we will be waiting a long time to be "fixed". In order to solve a problem, it must be ours to solve.

The most appropriate thing to do with feelings is to directly express them to the person that they are associated with. Sometimes, however, it is not safe to do that or it does not seem safe to do that. When that is the case, you have some options. It is important to have a confidante that you can talk with about your emotions. When unsure what you are experiencing, talking helps you sort it out. You may then be able to appropriately label your experience. You may then feel competent enough to discuss them with the party the emotions are connected to. That is the most effective course of action. If experience has taught you that talking directly with them will not achieve the desired results, try writing them a letter. If they read your letter, they will have "heard you".

Sometimes negative sentiments persist after you have expressed them. If they continue to plague you, then it is appropriate to make a conscious decision about what to do with them. They belong to you. They are your responsibility. You can take responsibility for them in a number of ways including these:

- 1) Taking direct steps to protect yourself, including deciding whether or not to stay in the relationship,
- 2) Setting and maintaining other appropriate boundaries,
- 3) Forgiving someone for something that happened in the past and letting go of it,
- 4) Checking for whose problem it actually is, yours or "theirs",
- 5) Examining your beliefs or "filters" about the event and challenging any cognitive distortions,
- 6) Changing your expectations of self and others,
- 7) Examining your own part in setting yourself up to be hurt in the same ways repeatedly and changing your own behavior,
- 8) Looking for the behavior characteristics of others that you dislike in yourself,

- 9) Using the AA technique of praying for their health, wealth, and happiness, to eliminate resentments.

These are but a few examples. The most important part of deciding what to do with your feelings is to accept full responsibility for them. When you accept responsibility for them, you never have to try to convince others that they are legitimate. You are the expert on your feelings.

A lesson in feelings management may be remedial for some people, but it is a timely lesson for essential skill development for recovering alcoholics and addicts. One of the most frequent contributing factors of relapse in early recovery is the lack of these essential skills.

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