

**Finding Love In Recovery -  
Important Factors in Learning How to Love in Recovery  
By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.**

Sometimes in early recovery, when you know that you are "working a good program", you may feel like something is still missing. You're still clean and sober. You are going to meetings. You are showing up for work everyday. You are starting to get your bills caught up. The important people in your life are remarking about how well you are doing. Yet, there still seems to be an absence of something important.

We may not be developing the kind of serenity or peace of mind that we had hoped for. We may entertain the notion that we will be happy when we find that magical something outside of ourselves that will make us whole. Romance is one of those magical "somethings" that is frequently called upon to produce instant happiness. It is not uncommon for newly recovering addicts to sabotage their fragile sobriety by entering into romantic relationships before they are ready.

There are many important early recovery tasks. One that is important to successful relationship skill development as well as abstinence maintenance, is the development of a new identity. This happens over time in recovery. In this process, the old identity of drinker/user gives way to the new identity of drinker/user who is not drinking/using. That identity is eventually replaced with a broader identity of a multifaceted individual who is recovering, and whose life is defined by many things including recovery. In order to be able to be truly intimate in a relationship you have to have a clear and comfortable sense of self. It is hard to be in a relationship with someone else when you can't feel comfortable in your own skin. When we don't have a firm, positive sense of self, we may enter into romantic relationships on a sort of "self-finding" mission, only to discover later that we have actually lost ground in that endeavor.

Sometimes we look to our significant other as an extension, reflection or definition of self. There is also the possibility of transferring our dependency on our higher power to that significant other. For at least the first year in recovery, the primary focus of a recovering addict's life should be developing a solid foundation for recovery. This would involve going to many meetings, acquiring and using a sponsor, being of service to others, and learning how to replace the chemical with healthy living skills.

One of the most important living skills to be developed is relationship skills. Relationship skills include ability to effectively communicate and problem solve, ability to put yourself in others' positions (role taking), ability to ask for what you want and need directly, ability to trust, ability to appropriately identify, communicate and work through feelings, ability to manage stress, ability to take responsibility for one's own issues and let go of responsibility for others' issues. When you engage in a new relationship without these much needed relationship skills, you endanger your fragile recovery.

Think about it. What do alcoholics and addicts do when they have emotional pain, conflicts, or feelings and problems that they don't know what to do with? They use

alcohol or other drugs to fix it, or escape from it. One of the ways that entering into a romance can sabotage recovery is that your routine changes as you incorporate the new person into your life and your schedule.

You have probably worked pretty hard to set up the structure and daily routine that not only helps with maintaining your abstinence and recovery, but that also helps to build self-discipline skills. Twelve step meetings may give way to rendezvous. Romance with another recovering person is particularly precarious, especially when you both go to the same 12 step home group.

Relationships require some of the same coping skills and resources that sobriety requires. While you are learning these new living skills and applying them to recovery, you are simultaneously called upon to work through old unresolved relationship issues. In order to have healthy relationships in recovery, you must resolve old emotional relationship baggage. Otherwise, you would tend to repeat the past.

Having a healthy relationship in recovery demands that you develop a solid sense of self, mind your priorities, which should continue to be recovery, and practice new living skills. Sponsors really come in handy as you grapple with taking on a romantic relationship in early recovery. As we turn to sponsors to help us navigate other turbulent waters of early recovery, so can we use experienced guidance in the realm of developing intimacy skills. It is particularly important to have as a sponsor someone who seems to have some solid recovery in the area of relationships.

If you have never learned intimacy skills, you may not know the difference between healthy and unhealthy relationships. Hopefully, your sponsor can guide you through the process when it is time. You can recover in the area of relationships. As you find yourself recovering to greater and greater levels of "wellness", you will notice that the people that you are attracted to, and that are attracted to you, have also achieved similar levels of wellness.

If you don't have a clear sense of self, aren't able to take care of most of your own needs, and don't know you want from yourself or others, then you are probably not ready to be in a healthy relationship yet. Work on your own issues. When you're ready, there will still be time.

Copyright 2009, Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D., <http://www.peggyferguson.com>  
Hubbard House Publishing, Stillwater, OK.