

Working Through Feelings in Addiction Recovery

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One of the most important tasks necessary for maintaining abstinence and growing in recovery is learning how to appropriately work through feelings. Many people use alcohol and other drugs in place of dealing with or managing emotions. Alcoholism/drug addiction often involves skill deficits. When the chemical is eliminated, the roles that the chemical played in the addict's life must be replaced by healthy living skills. Sometimes recovering alcoholics/addicts must re-learn to do routine daily tasks without aid of the chemical. Sometimes they have to learn skills that were never acquired at an age appropriate time because they were already using chemicals in place of those needed skills. Feelings management is an area that commonly needs remedial work in recovery. Recently, a patient asked me to make a list of specific, concrete things that you can do with feelings, to effectively deal with them or work through them. Below is the list that we concocted together.

- I) For Fear try these things:
 - A. Identify it. Say it out loud. Fear only thrives in the dark.
 - B. Use cognitive therapy. (See my article on using the ABCs of Cognitive Therapy for Working Through Feelings)
 - C. Ask yourself these questions:
 - 1. Is it a reasonable fear?
 - 2. Can I do anything about this?
 - a. If it is a reasonable fear and if you can do something about it, use pro-active problem solving.
 - b. If it is either not a reasonable fear (e.g., something with even a reasonable probability of happening) or not something that you have any power or control over, then use thought stopping to eliminate worry, rumination, and obsessing about it,
 - 3. Use prayer, especially the Serenity prayer to reduce fear.

- II) For Anger, try these:
 - A. Identify what you're angry about.
 - B. Identify any other feelings that may have occurred before the anger.
 - C. If there is a conflict to be resolved, resolve it.
 - D. If your anger is about hurt, work through the hurt.
 - E. Identify the part you play in your anger. Take responsibility for your anger and for resolving it.
 - F. For resentment, which is a kind of residual, leftover, underlying anger, try these things:
 - 1. Make amends to the other person for your part in hanging onto that resentment.
 - 2. Work on forgiveness of the other person involved. If you are not willing to forgive, work on the willingness to forgive.

3. You can always use the old AA standby for resentment, which is to pray for that person's health, wealth, and happiness (even if you don't mean it, eventually you will).

III) For Shame, try these:

- A. Keep in mind that it is an ongoing process to reduce shame.
- B. Keep doing the next right thing in your life.
- C. Don't do what you will feel guilty for, which can turn into shame.
- D. Identify the source of the shame. We are not born with shame. It comes from outside of us. Look for the shaming messages in your life that have told you that you are not good enough. (e.g. mom, dad, school).
 1. Combat those with disputing statements of your own as they come up.
 - a. Use positive affirmations or self-talk to change the old shaming messages that are part of your emotional baggage, and the current negative self talk that you engage in of your own free will. Change old negative statements to positive ones like these: "I am good enough", "Everyone makes mistakes", "I am human and I am worthwhile".

IV) For Guilt, try these:

- A. Admit where you are/were wrong.
- B. Make amends as events occur.
- C. Keep doing the right thing.
- D. Forgive yourself for being a fallible human being and not perfect.
- E. Stop beating yourself up.

V) For Hurt, try these:

- A. Identify the feeling as hurt, apart from the anger associated with it.
- B. Use cognitive therapy to identify and change any cognitive distortions that may be creating unnecessary hurt.
- C. Ask yourself if you could have "taken it wrong".
 1. If so, try to give the offending party the benefit of the doubt, or
 2. Ask for clarification of the message or the meaning of the situation from the person that "hurt" you."
 3. Communicate your feelings to the person.
 - a. Use this template:
 1. When you (behavior), I feel (feeling)".
 2. Don't defend your feeling.
 3. Don't over-explain it.
 4. Just name it and share it.
 5. For long standing grievances or hurt feelings, you may have to work on forgiveness.

VI) For Sadness, try these:

- A. Gift someone by sharing that feeling with them.

- B. For long standing sadness, write about it in a letter to God, in a journal, or in poetry.
 - C. For grief, write the person who is gone a letter.
 - D. Practice increased self-care.
 - E. Prayer.
- VII) For Loneliness, try these:
- A. Find enjoyable company; get out and meet new people.
 - B. Love your pets
 - C. Take a walk, or make the most of some solitary activity that helps you commune with nature or with God.
 - D. Volunteer your time or other resources to help others and get out of self.
 - E. Call someone you haven't talked to in a long time.
 - F. Make a gratitude list.
- VIII) For Helplessness, try these:
- A. Identify the feeling as helplessness, apart from any other feelings you may be having, including fear and/or anger.
 - B. Write about it.
 - C. Talk about it.
 - D. Use inner dialogue to remind yourself that you are not God, and that you are not responsible for everything and everyone in the universe.
 - E. Relinquish control of the situation to the care of your Higher Power, recognizing that God has a better plan than you could come up with.
- IX) For Joy, try this:
- A. Spread it around.