

# Treating Underlying Issues in Recovery

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We drink because we're depressed, and we're depressed because we drink. We use drugs because we're ashamed and we're ashamed because we use drugs. We chase after people because we're lonely and we're lonely because we chase after unavailable people. What's going on here? Why are we acting in such self-defeating ways?

The answer lies in our childhood. We were neglected or abused. We were abandoned or incested. We experienced some unfortunate incident in our family, and everyone got put on the back burner as the tragedy unfolded. For me, it was the death of my brother when I was 12. According to the experts on childhood trauma, this alters our brain permanently—not to mention our psyche and spirit—the parts of us who need love to thrive.

To avoid the constant cycle of relapse followed by a return to recovery, we have to deal with these underlying issues. We could seek professional help with someone who understands addiction, or we could seek out a “Wounded Healer.” This is someone who understands what we've been through because they have experienced the same thing themselves. They become our “Enlightened Witness,” as Alice Miller explains in her book *The Drama of the Gifted Child*. This “Wounded Healer” can be more compassionate and empathetic than non-addicts. Whomever you choose, make sure you can trust them and that they have their best your best interests at heart.

Ask him or her to participate in the following process: Let’s use an alcoholic as our example and his Sponsor as our “Enlightened Witness.”

1. Admit that you have underlying issues. Nothing can change until you acknowledge that you have a problem. This is the First Step in Alcoholics Anonymous. Like the Step it helps to admit that you are powerless for now and need help. Take the time to announce this at a meeting or to your Sponsor. Most of all be fearlessly honest with yourself and be humble. I believe that “pride goes before a fall,” or after a fall as well. Pride has no place at this crucial time of your life.

2. Identify the underlying issues: If you do not remember your childhood look at photographs, talk to siblings, friends or your parents who knew you when you were a child. Meditate or analyze your dreams. The truth will come out if you want it to. Once I was willing to remember, I started having flashbacks. Here is a list of underlying issues to choose from:

- o chronic insecurity
- o chronic anxiety
- o depression
- o feelings of alienation
- o loneliness
- o a profound hunger for love

- o an exaggerated fear of abandonment and rejection
- o feelings of deprivation
- o feelings of emptiness
- o confusion or fear when love is available
- o anxiety when things are going well
- o some kind of addiction

3. Talk about what you remember. Talk at closed meetings. Talk with your Sponsor. Talk to a therapist. Talk to a friend. Find some you can trust and who can either sympathize or even empathize with what you have gone through. Don't stop talking until you have emptied out your pain. Do not for a minute think you are talking too much or bothering someone. You are in recovery. This exercise is not a conversation. You do not have to ask how your listener is feeling. You have to talk and let things you have forgotten seep up from your unconscious.

4. Write in your journal about what you are discovering. As you write, marvelous things you have forgotten will spill out onto the page. This can be a personal journal or you can share it with others. My journal, which I started in 1982, became the draft of my first book *Addiction to Love*. Just pour your heart out on to the page and further this process of discovery.

5. Feel all of your emotions as they come up without drinking or using other unhealthy mood-altering experiences. Addicts don't like to feel painful emotions. We like to self-medicate or distract ourselves. We like to hide our feelings or stuff them or lash at others to release them. Do not let shame stop you from feeling the emotions. There is no emotion that should be ashamed of. Even if you did something you regret because of your feelings, you can deal with that when you get to the Ninth Step. For now just feel. This was the very first thing I heard at my very first meeting in Alcoholics Anonymous. My sponsor said, "If you want to recover you have to feel your feelings." I did and it hurt and now I am passing on this information to you so you can recover.

6. Grieve what you went through. If you can't do this directly, imagine that your inner child was hurt, and do for him what you cannot do for yourself. Grieving is similar to my suggestion above. You feel the loss of your childhood. You wish you had not suffered so much. You wish you could have had loving parents. You want what you did not have because you were just a little child and deserved more.

7. Get angry for awhile if you have spent a life time suppressing your emotions. This is an important step in the process. It is part of letting go. When you get angry you are being honest. You are not making excuses for your parents. You are feeling what all children need to feel to survive and yet were not allowed to feel. For more about anger, see Susan Anderson's book: *The Journey from Abandonment and Healing*.

8. Do not get lost in the anger. Anger is a "double edged sword." It is part of the process, not the process itself. As soon as you are able, move on and put this all into perspective. Were the people who hurt you abused or neglected? What about your grandparents? If you are a parent did you pass down the pain to your children to ease your own den" I did . . .

9. After you put things into perspective, consider forgiving these people. To forgive means to let

go of resentment. You do not have to like them, associate with them, or let them continue to hurt you. This suggestion is controversial. I talk about this in my book, *The Art of Changing*. Some professionals say it is not necessary or might even be harmful. AA says it is an absolute imperative. I believe it is important. Nothing changed in my life until I forgave my mother. I could not forgive myself before I forgave her. This happened when I discovered that my mother was mentally ill, and could not care for me. It took the sting out. I thought she neglected me on purpose. Her time in the mental hospital was kept from me. What John Bradshaw called a “toxic secret.”

10. Accept what happened to you. How do you do this? You can't do it right away. You can't do it when you want to. You can't do it while you are in the angry stage. You will do it when you are ready. You can push yourself a little, but balance this with patience. Tell yourself: these were the cards you were dealt. Maybe something good came out of this. [I became a teacher because of what happened to me.] According to AA: “Acceptance is the answer to all my problems today. When I am disturbed, it is because I find some person, place, thing or situation--some fact of my life--unacceptable to me, and I can find no serenity until I accept that person, place, thing or situation as being exactly the way it is supposed to be at this moment.

11. Move on. This is the fun part. You drop all of this. You create a new life. You embrace your present and dream about the future. You live your life of abundance. Of course, the past will come back to haunt you now and then because this is the way the brain works, especially when you go home for the holidays to the scene of the crime, but as time goes on the pain of the past will lessen and come up less often to disrupt your new life in recovery.

12. Take care of yourself. Do for yourself what your parents could not or would not do. When This means a little pampering, forgiving yourself and having fun.

13. Be grateful for this process that is going to free you, change you, and bring you a brighter tomorrow. Gratitude, according to my first Sponsor, is another AA imperative. It takes yourself out of your own misery. If you don't feel grateful, “act as if.” Fake it until you make it. [Don't you love AA slogans?] One you discover how “being” grateful even when you don't “feel” grateful you will never stop.

14. Celebrate your victory and hard work. Use your imagination. What did you do when you graduated or got married or won the lottery. Celebrate your recovery as well. Celebrate God if you are a believer.

15. Pass all of this on to the next poor soul looking for help—anyway you can. This is why I started writing and teaching. It is fun and good for my self-esteem. This is the 12th step and while touted as a suggestion, it is like suggesting you put on a parachute when you jump out of a plane.

16. Thank your Higher Power, if you have one, for recovery. It is a gift. Not everyone find recovery. This is the 11th Step and my favorite.

