

## The Story of Emotional Sobriety \*

In 1958 the AA *Grapevine* published *The Next Frontier: Emotional Sobriety* by AA co-founder Bill Wilson. At that time, with more than twenty years in sobriety and no small amount of remarkable personal and spiritual growth, Bill continued to suffer from debilitating depression. It was a matter with which he wrestled in any number of ways, coming over and over again to uncovering the root causes of his difficulties.

It was in this amazing piece that he first articulated the notion of emotional sobriety, that somehow there must be a way to escape the debilitating cycle of great emotional upheavals.

I kept asking myself, "Why can't the Twelve Steps work to release depression?" By the hour, I stared at the St. Francis Prayer... "It's better to comfort than to be the comforted." Here was the formula, all right. But why didn't it work?

Suddenly I realized what the matter was. My basic flaw had always been dependence - almost absolute dependence - on people or circumstances to supply me with prestige, security, and the like. Failing to get these things according to my perfectionist dreams and specifications, I had fought for them. And when defeat came, so did my depression...

Because I had over the years undergone a little spiritual development, the absolute quality of these frightful dependencies had never before been so starkly revealed. Reinforced by what Grace I could secure in prayer, I found I had to exert every ounce of will and action to cut off these faulty emotional dependencies upon people, upon AA, indeed, upon any set of circumstances whatsoever. Then only could I be free to love as Francis had.

Emotional and instinctual satisfactions, I saw, were really the extra dividends of having love, offering love, and expressing a love appropriate to each relation of life...

Thus I think it can work out with emotional sobriety. If we examine every disturbance we have, great or small, we will find at the root of it some unhealthy dependency and its consequent unhealthy demand. Let us, with God's help, continually surrender these hobbling demands. Then we can be set free to live and love; we may then be able to Twelfth Step ourselves and others into emotional sobriety.

In the article Bill points us to the solution via the same Twelve Steps of AA, but applied at a much deeper level – a progressive application. He directs us toward the core of our personality, that which the Big Book labels "old ideas" and "causes and conditions." This makes sense when we connect back to a foundational principle of the program of recovery, that somehow the process must produce a "psychic change", a substantially altered mental, psychological and emotional state, which can only occur deep within our being.

It's useful to realize that emotional sobriety is not merely the management of one's emotions, which is quite frankly a fool's game. When emotions surge, we lack power over them in the same way that we lack power over alcohol, drugs and other substances and process addictions. Instead we are pointed to root causes, the underlying dependencies from which emotional upsets emerge. When those are resolved, emotional sobriety falls upon us. We are struck emotionally sober.

\* Excerpted from *Progressive Recovery and the Twelve Steps: Emotionally Sober for Life*

## Expectations Inventory \*

Expectations are on a par with old ideas, and they are often just as obscure or unconscious to us. Expectations appear in three forms: what we expect of the other person, what we expect of ourselves, and what we expect of the relationship. To be clear, and to channel the wisdom of the rooms of recovery, any expectation is a pre-meditated resentment. Worse still, having expectations is the antithesis of acceptance, which is an ability to allow others, ourselves and our circumstances to stand as valid and sufficient on their own. We might go so far as to say that expectations are akin to conditions, and love is supposed to have no conditions. Our standard needs to be to take things as they are. Also, we need to tell ourselves the truth about our inner motivations.

First then, what do we expect of the other person?

What we think we need or want of them is typically the easiest place to start. To meet our needs, i.e. physical, emotional, financial or sexual. To do things for us like take care of shopping, or household chores. To attend to the necessities of life that we may not want to deal with, such as finances or disciplining children. To entertain us. To take care of us physically when we are ailing.

As if these were not challenging enough, there is a whole greater realm of expectations we may have of others. To meet our emotional, psychological, or spiritual needs. To have a family with us, and to raise children. To be available to us. To support us. To have our back.

Beyond that, we may expect someone to be honest. Or caring. Or open minded. We may think they should have certain character traits.

The first protestation is usually, "But aren't those reasonable expectations?"

Only if they are things that the other person is routinely going to do anyway. But many of our disagreements come from someone being unaware of our interests, or unable or unwilling to address them. Or maybe they simply are not the kind of person who has those attitudes or character traits.

The truth is that expecting something from someone who will not or cannot provide it is the height of insanity.

This usually surfaces a question. "If I can't expect them to meet my needs and wants, why would I be in relationship with them?"

That is the most important question. And we'll come back to it shortly after we explore some of the other arenas of expectations.

Secondly, what do we expect of ourselves in relationship?

Much of what we described above may very well apply to us. And in the same way, we may simply not be able or willing to meet our own expectations. After all, there remains this notion of powerlessness through which we much constantly engage and explore.

Perhaps the most common phrase heard in the rooms of recovery is how we "beat up on ourselves." Given our consistently unrealistic perspectives of ourselves, that is hardly surprising. We routinely let ourselves down. Our failure to meet those self-imposed, old-idea-fueled expectations is the source of a great deal of violence we inflict upon ourselves. One of the phrases in the rooms that seems to ring

truer than true is this, “If someone else treated me as badly as I treat myself, I’d have to kill them.” That is the perfect contemplation through which to see our sometimes damaging self-appraisals.

Last, what do we expect from relationship itself?

This is an arena with great mischief in it. This is simply because we expect things that no relationship can provide like security, reliability, and comfort. Worse still, we too often expect to be validated through a relationship, or to find value and meaning, or purpose. Sometimes we have unrealistic ideas of how a relationship will somehow fix something about ourselves that only Progressive Power can solve.

All these matters are a breeding ground for disappointment, and of course for resentment. Thankfully we can address these expectations via the same inventory approach we explored in Step Four. In some cases, we will see long-standing relationship patterns come into focus.

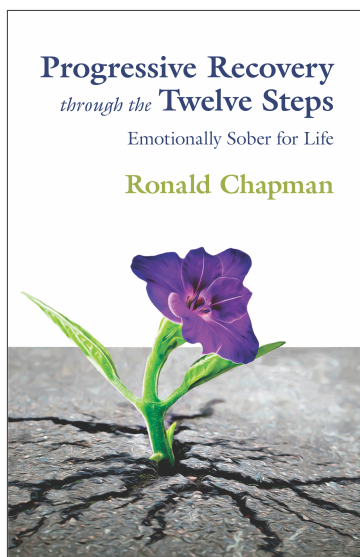
Remember the point of the inventory efforts is to see and understand our own internal blockages. Then to use the Steps to bring the power of Higher Power to bear on these otherwise unsolvable challenges, for it is a Progressive Power that can and will solve that which is unsolvable by us.

Let’s return now to the question of why I should be in relationship with someone if the whole point of relationship cannot be to have my needs, wants and desires met by another person.

Our only choice is to eliminate all the unrealistic expectations to see what is left. Perhaps companionship is one of the few that will stand.

Or we might take a step toward great and painful honesty. What if the only reason to be with someone is to love them ... to provide for them rather than expecting something of them? What if our motivation for relationship were to be nothing more than the benefit of the other person?

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