

## The only thing an addict fears more than getting treatment is getting out of it.

**Fear is a big part of what drives addictive behavior and it is also one of the biggest obstacles to meaningful recovery and long-term independence. But it need not be. So what exactly is fear? What causes it? And what can we do about it?**

Whether you are contemplating entering an alcohol or substance abuse treatment program or are just completing one, you are sure to experience fear. And while fear is usually mixed with a variety of other thoughts and emotions, some more rational than others, we'd like to reassure you that not only is it "normal" to fear, but what we fear says a lot about our life experience. And we can not only learn from that, we can course correct.

**To begin, fear is a big part of addiction.** If you are addicted, there is the fear of going without the substance; the fear of being caught using the substance; the fear of what people will think if they find out; the fear of the consequences it will bring to bear on your relationships, your responsibilities, your health, your job, your finances and/or your social standing; the fear when you realize you are no longer able to control the addiction; the fear of changing or asking for help; the fear that you won't find help; the fear the help you find won't work; and even the fear that the help you find will work, causing a ripple effect in other areas of your life.

**And whether you realize it or not, fear is also a big part of your healing, recovery and long-term independence.** Once you are clean or sober, you will likely experience a variety of fears; briefly in some cases, more pronounced in others; some rational and others not so much. Initially there is the fear that people will find out about your addiction past and view you differently; the fear that you're too late to mend your relationships; the fear that you are not employable; the fear that you are going to "isolate" and never have any fun again

## The Four S's to Successful Recovery and a Life of Independence

### Structure:

While you were in treatment, you kept a daily schedule. Although you may at times have felt that the structure was overly rigid, the purpose of having the structure was to orient you to the idea that structure has value. A regular pattern of waking, eating, exercising, working, reflecting, socializing and sleeping is at the core of a healthy, independent lifestyle. Structure and routine enable your body to "re-learn" how to follow its natural rhythm. Maintaining a schedule, planning your day and building more routines into your day are some basic things you can do to maintain structure in your life.

### Support:

Support isn't just having the love and support of family and friends. It's important to understand that "support" requires an active effort on your part. Support involves engaging in and receiving assistance from all individuals and organizations that are

because you are not supposed to frequent certain kinds of restaurants, bars, parties and/or hang with the people who do; the fear of old habits, thought patterns, emotions, people, places, beliefs and temptations getting the best of you; the fear of letting those who believed in you down; the fear that those who did not believe in you might be right; the fear that your best efforts won't be good enough; and the fear of relapsing and having to start all over again.

Quite frankly, living with all these fears can be exhausting. So what exactly is fear? What causes it? And what can we do about it when it occurs?

**Fear is nothing to be ashamed of because it is natural.** Just as addiction is a chronic, progressive disease with a brain chemistry component to it, fear also has a brain chemistry component to it that often requires rebalancing, rewiring and rebooting. Or to put it another way, you literally have to retrain your brain to overcome and/or negate unhealthy fears. And it can be done.

Studies show that we are all born with only two fears: the fear of falling and the fear of loud noises. The rest of our fears are (directly or indirectly) learned. When you look at fear from that perspective, it makes you wonder why we so often surrender to it so readily. But knowing it's learned can also make breaking down and overcoming fears a much more manageable task.

Fear is an equal opportunity predator. To handle fear more effectively, you need to understand it properly. There are 4 fundamental elements regarding all fears:

1. **Fear lives in the future, not the present.** The process of creating fear's chemical reaction in the brain usually begins unconsciously by just *anticipating* a scary, unpleasant or stressful circumstance. Fear is always about something that might/could happen but hasn't yet. So as long as your focus remains on the present, you cannot have fear. When fear sets in ask yourself: "Do I have that specific problem/issue/concern/circumstance at this very moment?" Realizing you do not because it is in the future and has not yet happened might bring you surprising relief. Why? Because whether it's 5 minutes, 5 days or 5 years in the future, there is still time to do something about it; there is still time to impact

here to help you. Active involvement in a recovery group, talking to your doctor about your recovery, seeing an individual and family therapist and drawing strength from your faith or other inspirational figures are ways in which you support your recovery.

### **Service:**

"Giving back" to your community, your church or another recovering addict instills a sense of compassion, confidence and commitment to living a healthy, independent life. No matter how far you've come or how far you'll go, giving your time freely to those in need pays big dividends to you in the realm of self-esteem, personal growth and gives your brain the positive feedback it needs to counter the destructive, self-centered habits you formed when you were actively using.

### **Spirituality:**

Addiction is a disease in which the sense of spirit and meaning in life is profoundly affected. Over time, drugs and alcohol rob you of your personal depth and spiritual center. By using drugs and alcohol over and over again, the addict trades brief experiences of relief or "highs" for real personal and spiritual growth. Developing or re-awakening your "center," a deepening appreciation of the profound mystery of life and understanding that there is more to life than the narrow world of this disease is a way to counter the negative effects of the struggles of everyday life and grow as a healthy person in long-term recovery.

the circumstance in your favor (at best) or protect yourself from the circumstance's impact on you (at worst).

2. **Fear is just an emotion or feeling. It has no power outside that which you assign it.** Emotions – especially fear -- cloud judgment, and not just that of addicts. The more you can consciously stop and take a moment to think about what you are feeling (or doing), the better you will get at self-soothing and/or overriding unhealthy emotions. For example, you have a bad day and start to want a drink. So far, that is pretty normal. But as an alcoholic you not only want a drink, you start to fear you will have a drink. That fear is an emotional reaction to the mere idea of drinking, not drinking itself. When you stop and recognize (and own) the difference, you can make the fear powerless because you can (with practice) control your emotional reactions and the impending actions that often accompany them. Fear is a feeling. Don't live life based on how you *feel* because your feelings change all the time. Cling to what you *know* to be true, and the fears and their power will subside.
3. **Fear is always about loss:** loss of life, love, friendship, face, respect, reputation, wealth, etc. The fear of losing the source of your attachment is directly proportionate to the intensity of the attachment you have to it. Remember that your value and validation as a person should never be dependent on exterior sources or circumstances. So practice being loosely tethered to the things you love, want and need vs. being dependent on them and/or defined by them. Doing so will help keep you centered and make it easier to say "no" to whatever circumstance, feeling and/or impending consequence is triggering the fear, keeping it at bay.
4. **Fear is present only when there is desire.** Fear arises when there is a conflict between what you want/need/love and what might happen as a result of that want/need/love going unfulfilled. We build up expectations around life and come up with a concrete picture of how our lives should be vs. how they actually might be. This rigidity forms a strong foundation for fear to take root and spread. Circumstances + perspective = your experience. We have no control over circumstances. And we have no control over others. But if we are flexible, and cultivate the ability to "reframe" our circumstances and/or others (e.g. take a different perspective), we can change the outcome's affect on us (our experience). There is strength and healing in the ability to roll with life while staying grounded vs. viewing each storm as something to survive. Or to put it another way, it is often better to be a willow with deep roots than a mighty but rigid oak.

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Let's say you have just finished your stay at an addiction treatment center and the doctors tell you that you are ready to take those first steps into normal day-to-day life. So with discharge plan in hand and the best wishes of your doctors and newly sober friends, you return home. But as you wake up that first morning in your own bed,

your “normal” life no longer feels normal. The hours you formerly spent drinking or using must now be filled with other activities. And filling the first hour or two is intimidating enough without thinking about all 24 of them.

Your relationships with family and friends do not seem “normal” either. They seem tense and awkward; and their palatable tension is likely to add to yours. You’re afraid to fail them; they are afraid to fail you. No one knows how to be “normal” around you because they’re not used to you being in a “normal” state.

Your day is probably further complicated by the fact that you (likely) need to find a job. The thought of explaining your employment “gaps” understandably sets off your stress levels. Or worse, you still have your old job but have been “out sick” for weeks and have to go back. Lying about where you’ve been and what is wrong. And letting your co-workers fill in the gaps themselves while around the water cooler is both frustrating and alienating. But telling people you barely know the truth seems unacceptable, if not downright foolish.

And then they invite you to happy hour to “catch up.”

To paraphrase Mark Twain, courage is not the absence of fear but the resistance to it and the eventual mastery of it. And that’s where you begin. The reality is the new fears and pressures of living as a clean/sober person can and will mount very quickly... within a day or two, if not hours, from your release. And the new advantages of living a sober life will unfortunately come much more slowly. Learning to control, overcome and eventually master your fears and enjoy life again will be a trial-and-error process that will take months of practice, tons of time and lots of courage.

For some, the initial interaction with other clean/sober people may be anxiety ridden because they likely only socialized with others while drinking or using. Because of that, their brain and personality were “offline,” and they were not truly engaged socially in a meaningful or “normal” way. Their social discomfort was blotted out, or at least numbed, by the drugs or alcohol. After all, there was no need to master the art of conversation or learn the nuances of successful social interaction as long as they were drunk or high, often times like everyone else around them.

With drinking it’s particularly tough because you can avoid the places that serve alcohol – at least for awhile-- but there is no avoiding the media. Billboards, web banners, TV ads, radio commercials... they are everywhere promoting the social and personal “rewards” of drinking. And it’s all legal.

“Society and the media’s acceptance and even promotion of drinking as a social activity preys upon the fears of an addict, and it does not make sobriety any easier,” says Ken O’Krent, clinical director for Enterhealth. “The recovering addict can never think to themselves “I’ve got this...” They must always remember that alcohol and drugs are simply poison to them. They should liken it to being a diabetic who cannot eat sugary foods, or a hypertensive individual who cannot eat salt. The addict need not feel resentful, or weird; nor should they be afraid to socialize. They just need to accept that they are forever different than the average person, and they must find fun, connection and social acceptance in other ways without the aid of alcohol.”

Getting sober/clean is one thing. But staying that way is where the real challenges lie. Sobriety is not for the faint of heart. It’s especially hard the first 3 to 6 months, until you find your rhythm; your voice; your courage. But the idea of tackling all the uncertainties life will throw at you and mastering all the nuances that contribute to a fulfilling, independent, sober/clean life should not be something to fear.

FDR was wrong. We've nothing to fear, *including* fear itself. You can do this.

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