

Resources for Recovery

Healthy Friendships Support Recovery

It probably comes as no surprise that when we're in active addiction we make 'associates' rather than friends –people we hang out with because we're getting something from them or they need something from us. People who, if not for the addiction, we have very little in common with. And we often end up learning the hard way that when we're in a tough situation, these people are nowhere to be found.

Understandably, these experiences of 'friendship' in addiction can make us really wary of connecting with and trusting anyone again. However, if we want to grow in confidence in our recovery and begin to create a life worth living, learning about and beginning to build healthy friendships is highly important.

Of course, this is not easy at first. In early recovery social interactions are uncomfortable, we don't have our old ways of coping to lean on and it's normal to feel self-conscious and exposed. However, by daring to reach out and connect with sober people, we not only learn more about ourselves, but we begin to find people with whom we share healthy common interests. And in time it is in these interactions that we learn the meaning of true friendship - neither party expects to get something from the other. Instead, it is a personality bond that

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keeps us connected – a bond that is not conditional on what we can get or what we give.

Healthy friendships in recovery will often act as a 'mirror' to show us things about ourselves that we may not have seen before. They frequently awaken parts of us that we were aware of before addiction, but had since forgotten. Friendships teach us about life and how to handle situations in new, healthier ways. And it's often our friendships that help us through tough times and teach us to believe in ourselves.

But what about being a healthy friend to ourselves? While the key to this process usually involves a generous amount of self-compassion that certainly doesn't mean it's simple...or easy. In addiction we do our best to get away from our true self, certain that our feelings are wrong, unwanted, or unacceptable to others. We then turn on ourselves believing that we are bad, shameful and unworthy. Even after becoming sober we are commonly caught up in a self-loathing cycle. However, it is only when we learn to have compassion for ourselves, in the same way we do for our friends, for example, that we are able to accept where we are in our recovery journey and move forward in our lives.

Mindfulness and DBT have proven to be effective tools for building self-compassion. They

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teach us to look at the facts, to accept where and who we are, and to operate from our 'wise mind' rather than an 'automatic pilot' state where our thoughts ramble into self-negativity, such as "I'm such a loser" or "I can't do anything right". It's a sad truth that while we wouldn't dream of saying these things to a friend, we often say them easily to ourselves. Building self-compassion means finding ways to be good and gentle to ourselves, treating ourselves as we'd treat a best friend.

Friendship in recovery doesn't have to end there, though. When someone feels that they are on a healthy path, with good supportive friends and a healthy sense of self, giving back may be the next step they want to take. There are endless ways to begin to give back. You could start by simply being a good friend to someone who needs some encouragement or support. In time, when you are ready, you may choose to be someone's sponsor. You could sweep the floor at your home group or you could volunteer with an organization that inspires you.

As folks involved in twelve step groups will know, gratitude and giving back (service work) is an anchor that can be used to keep our sobriety. In fact, some say that "you can't keep it if you don't give it away".

Giving back often leaves us richer for the experience, lifting our self-esteem, helping us feel more empowered in our recovery, finding meaning in our life, staying connected to what's important and developing new skills as well. Possibly the best reason of all to give back in recovery is that studies show¹ that individuals in recovery who continue to help others are more likely to stay abstinent than those who do not.

1. <http://psychcentral.com/blog/archives/2013/12/22/how-giving-makes-us-happy/>