

## Emotional Sobriety in Relationships

Allen Berger, Ph.D.

Earnie Larsen, author of "*Stage II Recovery - Life Beyond Addiction*" helped us understand that recovery unfolds in stages. The first stage is concerned with getting and staying clean and sober. We can think about this stage as breaking the bond of addiction. But as Earnie noted, getting out of a bad place is not the same as getting into a better place. Stage 2 is concerned with getting into a better place. For Earnie getting into a better place happens when we learn to have healthy relations. But what does it mean to have health relations? Let's take a look at some of the insights that Bill Wilson, a pioneer in recovery, that will help us answer this question.

Bill discovered that we needed to face our "defective relationships" with others because these were at the heart of our problem. When discussing Step 8 in *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* he pointed out the following, "*Since defective relations have nearly always been the immediate causes of our woes, including our alcoholism, no field of investigation could yield more satisfying and valuable rewards than this one. Calm thoughtful reflection about relations could deepen our insights.* (p.80)"

What is it that we learn from a calm and thoughtful introspection about our relations. If we are honest with ourselves we will be able to see that we are too emotionally dependent on others for our self-esteem and validation. This is referred to as "*other validated self esteem.*" Bill called this "absolute dependence" whereas I like to think of it as emotional dependency.

When we are emotionally dependent we make other people too important. We allow them to define us and edit our reality. We look to them to determine how we should think or feel about ourselves. We turn over to them our emotional center of gravity. The more important we make them, the more trouble we will experience in our relationship with them.

This is what makes our relationships defective. We are too dependent on others for our safety, for our self-esteem, and for our emotional well being. We cannot have a healthy relationship on these terms because our emotional dependency creates anxiety and a desire for the possession and

control of other people. We generate a set of unreasonable demands on others that we think are reasonable. *“If only you would do what I want you to do, we’d have a great relationship.”*

But this is not what a healthy relationship is. In a healthy relationship there is room for two. It isn’t just our way or our partners way. We need to learn how to join and yet preserve our autonomy. Keeping a hold of our individuality and preserving our integrity is important if we are to have healthy relationships.

I define emotional sobriety as the experience you have when what you do determines your emotional well being. So how do you achieve this elusive emotional state?

The answer is that we have to first become aware of our emotional dependency. This is not easy but can begin to come into view when we look at the causes of the trouble we experience in our relationships. Bill stated this *“It’s a spiritual axiom that every time I am disturbed, no matter the cause, there is something wrong with me.”*

What causes our troubles? The unreasonable demands or rules that we put on others to make us feel OK about ourselves. If you’d like to learn more about emotional sobriety and what you can do to achieve it then check out the book I have written on emotional sobriety, *“12 Smart Things to do When the Booze and Drugs are Gone.”*

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Dr. Berger is a talented psychotherapist who has written extensively about the experience of recovery, the important topic of emotional sobriety, integrating modern psychotherapy and the 12 Steps, and the psychological forces operating in the Twelve Steps. He is the author of ***12 Stupid Things that Mess Up Recovery, 12 Smart Things to do When the Booze and Drugs are Gone, 12 Hidden Rewards of Making Amends, 12 More Stupid Things that Mess Up Recovery, and Love - Secrets Revealed.***

You can learn more about Dr. Berger and his work at [www.abphd.com](http://www.abphd.com)