

The House of Sobriety: Emotional

Just as what you *think* affects your sobriety, so does what you *feel*. And what you feel has been distorted by substance abuse. Many people with addiction label the years they have spent using as “emotionally anesthetized.” Everything may have seemed normal on the outside, but within the family unit all the feelings of love, trust, affection and caring were bottled up.

How addiction impacts emotional health:

- The inability to feel: we feel numb, distant or disconnected from our feelings
- Difficulty expressing love or caring for another person
- Emotional Isolation: what you feel is never communicated to anyone
- Feeling alone: it’s just you and your addiction in a hostile world
- Preoccupied with guilt, anger and resentment
- Relationships seem hard: it seems like most relationships don’t work out
- Feeling anxious, frightened, lonely, impulsive

What you need to learn in recovery:

- How to identify your feelings and *accept* them, both good and bad: If you anesthetize yourself to pain and sorrow, you are also numbing yourself to happiness and joy.
- Rediscovering your self-identity: who are you? What do you like, dislike? What is important to you? How do you become the person you want to be? These questions are put on hold when living with active addiction. If you started using substances when you were very young, there are important parts of yourself you never got to find out about because of your substance use.
- Your reactions to other people may not always be reasonable—you may be more irritable, upset, or reactive than the situation warrants. This is because your brain is still healing from the impact of substance abuse.

- You must learn to cope with your strong feelings in ways that do not hurt yourself, your family, or others around you. It is important to give yourself time and space when you feel overwhelmed. It's important to give yourself time. Be patient. Pace yourself. Don't expect too much too soon. Keep a journal so that you can track your emotional progress; be sure, however, to measure this progress in weeks and months, not hours or days. Be proud of yourself for the strides you do take and don't despair when things seem to slide backwards and you feel out of control and incapable.
- It's important to find someone you can talk to who accepts your feelings unconditionally. Reaching out to others is not an easy process and people with addiction have a particularly hard time because they have had so little practice. You are not less of a person for admitting to someone else that you are troubled or afraid. All human beings are periodically troubled or afraid; all human beings need help and support throughout their lives. Being able to admit you are afraid is actually a sign of internal strength and growth, and it begins the "connectedness" that binds you to others, initiating friendship, affection, and love.
- People with addiction need to learn to take responsibility for their emotions. Realize that you can influence your emotions by how you deal with them, rather than putting the responsibility for your misery or joy on other people or outside events. That is both unrealistic and self-defeating. You must learn to act, rather than just react.
- You will have to learn to let go of your guilt and deal with your grief. When you were drinking or using, you said and did a lot of things you may be ashamed of now, or that you agonize over, wishing you could go back and change the past. Everyone with a history of addiction has experienced this. If you cannot let go of the past, you cannot be available for the future.

Many people with addiction find the serenity prayer helps them get through each and every day. This is the serenity prayer:

Give me the serenity

To accept the things I cannot change

To change the things I can

And the wisdom to know the difference

Sobriety is your first and foremost priority, for without it you will lose everything. Always remember the catechism: if you don't give your sobriety number one priority, you will drink or use again. And if you drink or use, you will die. Death is the end point of all our lives, but it is the responsibility of every person with addiction to ensure that it does indeed come at the end and not somewhere at the beginning or in the middle.