

Addiction Relapse Prevention During Traumatic Times

By James Garrett, CSW and Dr. Judith Landau

Go to a 12 Step meeting this past week and you will hear a level of confusion, anger, grief and support that goes to the very depth of the soul; to the very depth of recovery; to the edge of relapse, and back into recovery again.

This article is meant to provide a level of understanding about the interplay between recovery from addiction, relapse prevention and the trauma brought on by the terrorist attacks. We hope that it will support those in recovery from addiction who have been able to maintain their spiritual center and work the Steps, guidance to those who are close to relapse, and hope and determination to those who have relapsed.

Questioning the “Higher Power”

The cornerstone of 12 Step recovery is a belief in a Higher Power, as each individual understands him/her. We are taught to develop faith in our Higher Power and to turn our will and our lives over to this Higher Power. We are guided to acknowledge that there are no accidents in life, including our being in recovery. All things happen for a reason. We aren't meant to understand all of life--we only have to do the next clean and sober thing. The Higher Power will take care of the rest as long as we do our part. We are encouraged to believe that we are spiritual beings having a human experience.

The notion of letting go of “my control” and stopping “my ego” from running the show are the principles behind the 2nd and 3rd Steps. The notion of “self-will run riot” presents a clear picture of the need to turn our will over to our Higher Power. One look at the problems and chaos in our lives when we were active in addiction vividly demonstrates what resulted from our will and our running things. If we take back our will, it is inevitable that we would end up back in the same place of insanity and chaos.

So what happens if we are so horrified, shocked, saddened, and angry at the events of 9/11/01 that we start to question our Higher Power. You may have thought, or heard others say, “If you are so loving and caring, how could you let this tragedy happen to so many innocent people?”

“How could you bring so much devastation into a family and cause so many innocent children to lose a parent?”

“What happens if we end up with a major war, or biological warfare, and even more people are killed--how could you have this in your plan? I thought you were a loving and caring being.”

“I don't think I can trust a Higher Power who would let something like this happen.”

Maintaining trust, keeping faith and staying positive during such times of questioning is very difficult. However, it is healthy and important to ask the difficult questions. It is healthy to feel the depth of mistrust, as long as we are doing it with another recovering person, and not alone. For it is in the “we” of the program that balance in our thinking and feelings develop. Alone, we are doomed to repeat the past because, inevitably, the

thinking that got us into trouble in the first place will lead us back into the addiction. We will find ways to run from our fear rather than face the fear and recover.

Perhaps some of these following thoughts and suggestions that came from other recovering individuals will help you maintain focus on recovery and stay open with your feelings.

Joe H.

Keep in mind that what happened on 9/11/01 was the result of behavior that came from individual will, not the will of your Higher Power. Just like when you were using, your behavior was the result of your self-will run riot, not your Higher Power's will guiding you to do the next clean and sober thing.

Mary P.

Each year in America there are some 22,000 of us killed by handguns and over 16,000 killed by drunken drivers. We live in a violent society and this act of terrorism is not an isolated incident in our lives when looked at from the bigger perspective. Stay close to the rooms when you start to feel shaky.

Ron W.

When our self-will was out of control, what miracle guided us into recovery and a life of freedom? We know first hand what it is like to be controlled by something greater than ourselves, controlled by something we hate, something we want to destroy. Yet, reflect and think of who and what was being destroyed by the active addiction. We were destroying ourselves, and those closest to us--our families and loved ones. Somehow, our Higher Power never gave up on us, even when we had given up on ourselves, and our loved ones had given up due to our repeated deceitful actions. It is that same hope that we are asked to maintain during these horrific times.

Kathy J.

We are reminded, time and time again, that "I am not given anything thing that I am not ready to handle in my recovery". This includes painful events as well as joyous ones. The heart-warming stories told to us by the families and friends of those who died in the terrorist acts focus on their grieving and loss. We identify. This identification comes because many of us have heard from our families and friends about their grieving and feelings of loss when we were active in our addiction. How many times have we heard a loved one say to us, "I felt like I did not know who you had become. I was living with a stranger. It was like the real you had died." The tragic losses of 9/11 can be a reminder of the grief and loss we caused others due to our addiction. Keeping this upfront can be a reminder of the miracle of recovery and help in working the 9th Step with those we have harmed.

The bottom line is that there is nothing that will improve if I drink or drug today. Working the Program, not the problem, will keep you sane in an "insane" world.

Resentments

Over and over again, we are reminded that holding onto resentments will lead us back into addiction. Resentments keep us focused on the negative and let others live in our

heads rent-free. When we hold onto resentments we eventually feel like others are controlling us. Our immediate response is that we then need to control others. Holding onto resentments is a loss of freedom, a loss of justice, a loss of self-will, and an act of self-destruction.

The major religions of the World remind us of the importance of “Live and Let Live”.

Buddhist saying: “Hurt not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful.”

Islamic teaching: “No one of you is a believer until he desires for his brother that which he desires for himself.”

Jewish teaching of Rabbi Hillel: “What is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow: that is the whole Law; everything else is interpretation.”

Christian belief: “Do unto others, as you would have them do unto you.”

Carrying resentments puts our will back in control. How many times, while continuing to drink, gamble and use drugs, have we thought we were capable of solving the social evils of the world? The 12 Steps teach us that we are not capable of solving the world’s problems or injustices. We must first get humble, and start making small changes in ourselves, by straightening out our own thinking and our current life problems. Our drinking, gambling, or drug use only adds to world problems. As one recovering person recently stated, “My view of justice when I was drinking was to forgive myself and punish those I resented and envied”.

Letting go of resentments allows us the freedom to take responsibility for our words, actions, thoughts and feelings. Put simply in action steps:

- Don’t gossip
- Don’t criticize
- Don’t try to change others
- Don’t justify resentments
- Be gentle and forgive yourself and others

Anger

There is a difference between anger and rage. Anger is one of the four basic emotions that emerge from within us from infancy. The other three basic emotions are sadness, happiness and fear. Each of these basic emotions will be covered individually below.

Anger is the feeling that comes from not having our basic needs met, being cornered or attacked, being violated, or unjustly having something taken from us.

One of the big problems with anger is that many of us have never learned how to express healthy anger. Many of us were raised in alcoholic or abusive homes, where rage was a weapon of control. It was an emotion meant to impose control and engender fear in others. It was an emotion that was meant to inflict hurt, to create chaos, to start arguments that became the rationalization to continue to drink, gamble, or use drugs. Anger was used as a cover whenever more vulnerable feelings surfaced. The inappropriate use of anger is a classic example of the damage inflicted on children who grow up in an alcoholic home. Many of us experience tightened stomachs, get sweaty hands and underarms, start developing headaches, or feel a sense of insecurity whenever

we hear voices raised, or hear individuals loudly disagreeing with each other. The immediate thought and reaction in such situations is that something bad is going to happen and someone is going to get hurt, quite possibly us.

Unfortunately, the terrorist attack on 9/11 re-stimulates many of those same responses in us. We feel insecure, we get headaches, we have an anxious feeling that runs throughout our bodies and we start thinking again about how unsafe we are. This vulnerability is similar to the vulnerability we felt as children, when we witnessed violence, or bore the brunt of violence (either verbal or physical). The all-or-nothing reaction kicks in automatically and we find ourselves filled with the same rage that, growing up, we hated in others.

Today, we can change our experience with anger. We can talk about the anger of seeing buildings blown up. We can share the anger of seeing people jumping from burning buildings to their deaths. Sharing with others in recovery allows us to experience the freedom of expression, followed by the capacity to leave things there or be propelled into positive and appropriate action. A good example of this is to witness the outpouring of love and help coming from so many people from all over the world, as each person channels the anger into action.

Compulsive people (alcoholics, gamblers, and drug addicts) tend to be thin-skinned, touchy, rebellious and suspicious. Think of how you respond yourself when someone comes on too strong. We all prefer the extended hand rather than the upraised fist.

Fear

Fear is the second of the four primary feelings. It is a healthy feeling because it serves as a warning device when something is wrong or we are in some danger. But what happens when this warning device fails?

Unfortunately, many of us were either physically and/or verbally abused in childhood. This experience of abuse results in either a hyper-vigilant screening of the world around us, or in a shutting down of healthy fear. This all-or-nothing approach to self-protection either leaves us totally isolated and guarded, or involved in risky situations and behaviors. We can see that this type of black and white approach to fear is not healthy and is one of the dynamics that lead to relapse.

The terrorist attack can re-stimulate that all-or-nothing approach to protecting ourselves. It may result in thoughts and feelings that no one can be trusted. We are tempted to back off from going to meetings, to stop sharing, to isolate from our sponsors. We start to believe we are safe only when we are alone. This aloneness is a trigger for relapse because, by definition, it leaves us with only our own isolated thoughts. It eliminates the “we” part of the program. On the other hand, we may suddenly find ourselves hanging around “old friends” with whom we used to drink or get high. We might find ourselves going to bars again, thinking, “I haven’t drunk in quite some time and, now that football season is here, I need a distraction from all this terrorist stuff”. We might find ourselves in relationships that are abusive or unhealthy for some other reason. Again, the flip side of the hyper-vigilance coin is to fail to protect ourselves at all.

The 12 Steps is a great help in this regard. We are taught to maintain “constant vigilance” in areas related to our recovery. This means going back to the basics with such things as avoiding HALT (Hungry, Angry, Lonely, Tired) because we are likely to lose sleep over the tragedy, isolate, carry anger, and go without eating because we are preoccupied with worry. We need to accept being more vulnerable at this time. Each of us has times of the year when we are more vulnerable than others--anniversary of a death, a pending divorce, loss of a job. This disaster is also a time of vulnerability, and we may need to double up on meetings to take care of ourselves.

In recovery, we have the choice of how we deal with FEAR. To F--- Everything And Run or Face Everything And Recover.

Sadness

We will undoubtedly feel deep sadness from the pain of loss and suffering from this tragedy. What do we do with the tears? Will the sadness ever go away? What do I do if the sadness brings up other losses I have experienced in my life? These are all questions that surface when allowing sadness to emerge. Let’s look at them.

What do we do with the tears? First it is important to remind ourselves that tears are healthy. Tears are healing. Tears are an expression of sadness that allows both us and others to know the depth of pain we are in at this moment. Some people are comfortable sharing tears in the company of others. Others are more private about their crying. There is no right or wrong--what ever you are comfortable with is fine.

Will the sadness ever go away? When we are in the middle of crying it seems that the tears will never stop. However, they do not go on forever. We do not stay sad forever. The wisdom of the program comes into play here, in the teaching, “and this too shall pass”. All feelings are like waves that come onto a beach. They come in waves and then subside. The program teaches us not to run from our feelings. Many of us are not used to the intensity of a feeling, particularly when we’re early on in recovery. Remember, recovery is about change. If nothing changes, “nothing changes.”

What do I do if the sadness brings up other losses I have experienced in my life? It is common for many of us to have unresolved losses. We may have been using when a parent died and have never gone through the grieving process. We may have not grieved the loss of marriage? We may be cut off from our children due to our irresponsible behavior while in active addiction. Listening to parents talk about the loss of a child in one of the World Trade Center buildings, hearing a spouse talk about the grief from the death of a partner, or knowing someone who died from one of the terrorist acts, can trigger a strong depressive response. It can re-stimulate a sense of confusion and despair about going on in life. It is important to remember that our Higher Power does not give us anything we are not ready to handle. We don’t always get what we want, but we do get what we need. This sadness and re-stimulation of unresolved grief can be a gift and a stimulus to go to that next level in recovery. Perhaps you have noticed that you have “plateaued” or are “treading water,” and have been avoiding certain topics with your

sponsor. Taking this next step of addressing unresolved losses could open up many new avenues for a healthy recovery.

If you have significant sadness and/or re-stimulated unresolved grief there are some basic actions that will help. Here are a few:

- Put words to what you are experiencing, both on the inside and physically
- Take first things first, so that you counter feeling overwhelmed by doing the next clean and sober thing
- Restore hope and faith in whatever ways work for you
- Work to achieve balance in your responses, don't catastrophize or minimize
- Pray and meditate
- Exercise, eat well and get extra rest
- Attend extra meetings

Do I Need Professional Help

Each of us will experience some degree of sadness, anger, anxiety and vulnerability from the terrorist attack and it's aftermath. We are also more likely to experience such physical symptoms as reduced concentration, headaches, nausea, shakiness and insomnia. If you find that you are not taking good care of yourself, and have significant urges to cope with the tragedy in a dysfunctional way, such as by self-medicating with alcohol or drugs, over eating, gambling, over using sex, having thoughts of self-harm or what ever else you have used in the past, it is probably time to seek professional help.

This article was written in loving memory of those that lost their lives in the 9/11/01 terrorist attacks. It is posted on the web at www.holistic.com.

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