

Chapter 15

*A*wakening Feelings That Can
Sabotage Your Abstinence

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*The greatest enemies of us alcoholics are resentment,
jealousy, envy, frustration, and fear.*

-Alcoholics Anonymous

Once you're abstinent for a period of time, you'll experience your feelings with a regularity and intensity that you may not be familiar with. This is normal—unnerving, perhaps, but nonetheless, normal. Your first reaction as how to best cope with this bubbling cauldron of pain and sorrow will likely be to run and hide as fast as you can. And believe you me, running and hiding from your emotions is something that you're very practiced at.

At the same time, I hope that you're coming to appreciate that running and hiding from your feelings has done you more harm than good over the years. Sure, running and hiding achieved its main mission, disconnecting you from or numbing you out to the pain that feeling your feelings would entail—but at what cost?

What has it cost you over the years to run and hide from your feelings? What has it cost you over the years to medicate rather than deal with your feelings? What toll has emotionally shutting down taken on your emotional and spiritual well-being? What has it cost you in terms of running from the people who made you feel—good or bad? And perhaps more relevant to the discussion of long-term abstinence, just how able will you be to stay clean and sober if you deal with your feelings now the way you've always dealt with your feelings in the past?

Until you're willing and able to deal with your feelings in an open and direct fashion, your abstinence will be exponentially more at risk. Until you're willing and able to reveal your buried sorrow and work through your unresolved pain, you'll remain a ticking time bomb, ready to go off at a moment's notice, ready to activate the process of relapse with the wink of an eye.

To protect and preserve your sobriety, you need to

claim your feelings and reveal them to the world. You need to take ownership of your feelings and stand boldly by them rather than run from them. To do so, you must develop a skillset to work with your feelings. In order to assist you with the development of a skillset that will empower you to work through your unresolved feelings we'll examine in this chapter:

- 1) The self-defeating ways that you prevent yourself from experiencing what you're feeling.
- 2) Common feelings that you'll encounter the longer you remain abstinent.
- 3) The self-defeating ways that you cope with the circumstances that provoke what you're feeling.
- 4) Specific Recovery-based coping mechanisms to apply to the circumstances that activate the feelings that you're experiencing.

Pathfinder's Checklist

Ways of dealing with your feelings that may adversely affect your emotional well-being.

- 1) Deny your feelings
- 2) Emotionally numb-out
- 3) Emotionally shut down
- 4) Act-out rather than express your feelings
- 5) Binge on expressing your feelings

The first self-defeating way to cope with your feelings is to *deny* them. The most common ways to deny that you're experiencing feelings is to rationalize, intellectualize, minimize, blame, project on to others, trivialize, and/or discount either the circumstance that is provok-

ing what you might be feeling or the feelings themselves.

The second self-defeating way to cope with your feelings is to *numb-out*. The most common ways to numb-out is by ingesting substances such as food or alcohol and other drugs. You can also numb-out by participating in compulsive behaviors such as gambling, sexing, eating, work, exercise, isolating, spending money, surfing the internet, or watching television.

The third self-defeating way to cope with your feelings is by *emotionally shutting-down*. This is achieved often times in an unconscious way. Essentially what happens is you may experience feelings that a circumstance provokes, however, you're not connected to what those feelings are that you're experiencing. There are behavioral ways of shutting down emotionally. Some examples of this would be caretaking, people pleasing, withholding, withdrawing, avoidance of emotionally charged situations, and acting willfully.

The fourth self-defeating way of coping with your feelings is to *act-out* rather than express your feelings. Feelings that build up inside of you must be expressed in one fashion or another. Ideally, you express what you're feeling by self-disclosure. For any number of reasons you may choose to act-out rather than self-disclose what you're feeling. Examples of acting-out feelings would be drinking at your parents, creating chaos as a way of getting even, or coming home late because you want to show your life partner who the boss is.

The fifth self-defeating way of coping with your feelings is to *binge on expressing them*. Binging on expressing your feelings is analogous to the gas pedal being stuck to the floor of your car. Emotionally, the throttle is wide

open and you projectile vomit your feelings non-stop all over anyone who comes in to your path. But the mere act of only expressing what you're feeling is not coping with what you're feeling. For the person who continually expresses non-stop what they're feeling isn't stopping long enough to work through what they're feeling.

Pathfinder's Compass

- 1) Write about or discuss the ways in which you deny feelings you may be experiencing about a circumstance or a person.
- 2) Write about or discuss the ways in which you rationalize away feelings you may be experiencing about a circumstance or a person.
- 3) Write about or discuss the ways in which you minimize feelings you may be experiencing about a circumstance or a person.
- 4) Write about or discuss the ways in which you intellectualize away feelings you may be experiencing about a circumstance or a person.
- 5) Write about or discuss the ways in which you explain away feelings you may be experiencing about a circumstance or a person.
- 6) Write about or discuss the ways in which you invalidate feelings you may be experiencing about a circumstance or a person.
- 7) Write about or discuss the ways in which you project feelings you may be experiencing about a circumstance or a person onto another person or circumstance.
- 8) Write about or discuss the ways in which you may

numb-out so as not to experience feelings you may be experiencing about a circumstance or a person.

- 9) Write about or discuss the ways in which you may shut-down so as not to experience feelings you may be experiencing about a circumstance or a person.
- 10) Write about or discuss the ways in which you may act-out so as not to experience feelings you may be experiencing about a circumstance or a person.
- 11) Write about or discuss the ways in which you may binge on your emotions so as not to have to work through feelings you may be experiencing about a circumstance or person.
- 12) Write about or discuss how the ways in which you deny feelings you may be experiencing about a circumstance or person may cause you to feel overwhelmed.
- 13) Write about or discuss what impact feeling overwhelmed by denying your feelings may have on your Recovery-based lifestyle.
- 14) Write about or discuss what impact denying your feelings may have on your connections with your Recovery-based support system.
- 15) Write about or discuss what impact feeling overwhelmed by denying your feelings may have on your long-term abstinence from ALL alcohol and other drugs.
- 16) Write about or discuss what impact feeling overwhelmed by denying your feelings may have on your Recovery-based lifestyle.
- 17) Write about or discuss how the ways in which you deny feelings you may be experiencing about a cir-

cumstance or a person may activate the process of relapse.

The next Pathfinder's Checklist is a list of eight common feelings that you'll encounter the longer you remain abstinent. Although this list is by no means a complete list of every feeling that you'll experience, the feelings that appear in this list are feelings that you'll experience and must work through in order to protect and preserve your Recovery-based lifestyle.

Pathfinder's Checklist

Unresolved feelings that may activate the process of relapse.

- 1) Alienation from others
- 2) Anger
- 3) Fear
- 4) Grief
- 5) Loneliness
- 6) Loss of control
- 7) Resentment
- 8) Shame

Alienation is the first emotion that we'll discuss. Your chronic consumption of alcohol and other drugs has medicated just how disconnected from the human race you have become. What abstinence will likely awaken within you is how different you feel, how unwanted you feel, how alone you feel, and how awkward you feel relating to others without alcohol and other drugs to lessen your discomfort and help you to hide what you're afraid to let other people see.

Your sense of alienation from others will be compounded by the demands of Recovery to develop a support system, stay in daily contact with that support system, to speak openly about yourself, and to allow other people to have intimate knowledge of who you are and what you have done. This is one of the many paradoxical paths that you must negotiate—letting other people get to know you without being under the influence of alcohol and other drugs after spending a lifetime using alcohol and other drugs as a way of preventing people from getting to know you.

Pathfinder's Compass

- 1) Write about or discuss three circumstances that awaken feelings of alienation from others.
- 2) Write about or discuss three people that awaken feelings of alienation from others.
- 3) Write about or discuss how you can cope with your feelings of alienation from others identified in steps #1 and #2 in a way that will activate the process of relapse.
- 4) Write about or discuss what impact the methods that you identified in step #3 will have on your Recovery-based lifestyle.
- 5) Write about or discuss what impact the methods that you identified in steps #3 will have on your Recovery-based support system.
- 6) Write about or discuss step by step how the methods that you identified in step #3 will activate the process of relapse.
- 7) Write about or discuss how you can best deal with

your feelings of alienation from others identified in steps #1 and #2 by applying specific Recovery-based coping mechanisms.

The second emotion to be discussed is *anger*. Anger will be your constant companion throughout the early stages of abstinence. Anything and everything will make you mad. The reasons that you'll feel angry about anything and everything aren't as important as that you deal with your angry feelings in as honest and as open a fashion as possible. Just remember, feeling angry isn't a crime. However, letting your anger fester and remain unresolved will put your abstinence at great risk.

It's critical that you learn to acknowledge your anger, take ownership of your anger, and work through your anger. This is why a Recovery-based support system is critical to the preservation of your abstinence. It's difficult to work through your angry feelings without having people who can guide and support you.

Pathfinder's Compass

- 1) Write about or discuss three circumstances that awaken feelings of anger.
- 2) Write about or discuss three people that awaken feelings of anger.
- 3) Write about or discuss how you can cope with your anger identified in steps #1 and #2 of this exercise in a way that will activate the process of relapse.
- 4) Write about or discuss what impact the methods that you identified in step #3 will have on your Recovery-based lifestyle.
- 5) Write about or discuss what impact the methods

that you identified in step #3 will have on your Recovery-based support system.

- 6) Write about or discuss step by step how the methods that you identified in step #3 will activate the process of relapse.
- 7) Write about or discuss how you can cope with your feelings of anger identified in steps #1 and #2 of this exercise by applying specific Recovery-based coping mechanisms.

The third emotion on our list is *fear*. Fear will be another constant in your life when you're newly abstinent. The longer you remain abstinent the newer everything in your life will be. With each step that you take away from alcohol and other drugs, you'll take one more step into the darkness of the unfamiliar. Everything you do, say, and feel will be newly experienced clean and sober. Making new choices, going to new places, relying on new people have the potential to flood you with fear and apprehension.

Another source of fear is coping with the day-to-day stressors in your life without your old reliable friend—alcohol and other drugs. Your consumption of alcohol and other drugs created a sense of constancy and predictability. Your consumption of alcohol and other drugs afforded you a sense of control that you no longer experience when abstinent. Meeting life on life's terms can be unnerving, even terrifying. To do so without relying on old familiar ways of coping only amplifies the discomfort and fear that you'll experience.

Again, let me insert at this point, my advertisement for a Recovery-based support system. There's strength in

numbers. What you can't take on alone, you can easily conquer with the love and support of people who have already walked the walk that you're currently navigating. Fear will continually be with you—you have no say in that. But you do have a say as to whether or not you'll confront your fear alone or with the collective support of people who have already *been there, done that*.

Pathfinder's Compass

- 1) Write about or discuss three circumstances in your life today that awaken feelings of fear.
- 2) Write about or discuss three people that awaken fear.
- 3) Write about or discuss how you can cope with your feelings of fear identified in steps #1 and #2 in a way that will activate the process of relapse.
- 4) Write about or discuss what impact the methods that you identified in step #3 will have on your Recovery-based lifestyle.
- 5) Write about or discuss what impact the methods that you identified in step #3 will have on your Recovery-based support system.
- 6) Write about or discuss step by step how the methods that you identified in steps #3 and #4 will activate the process of relapse.
- 7) Write about or discuss how you can cope with your feelings of fear identified in steps #1 and #2 by applying specific Recovery-based coping mechanisms.

The fourth emotion to be discussed is *grief*. It may

strike you as odd that grief is an emotion that you'll encounter early and often in Recovery. But encounter it you shall, confront it you must. Why mourn? Why feel sorrow about no longer consuming alcohol and other drugs? After all, not drinking and drugging is a good thing, yes?

Yes, no longer consuming alcohol and other drugs is a good thing. But no longer doing anything, no longer being in relationship with anything, no longer having access to any companion, no matter how constructive or self-destructive that companion may have been, will evoke feelings of loss and sorrow.

Loss and grief is the one thing that my clients focus on the most in early Recovery. They feel it the deepest. They experience it the strongest. Grief exerts the strongest influence on their emotional well-being.

Recovery is not only a series of new beginnings, Recovery is a series of endings as well. You're ending your relationship with your best and dearest friend—alcohol and other drugs. You're ending your relationship with a way of life—the places you went, the people you went there with. Up to this point in time, every thought that you've hatched, every choice that you've enacted, every feeling that you've experienced has been shaped and influenced by your consumption of alcohol and other drugs. The very way that you've come to think about who you are, what you are, and what you do has to be scrapped, discarded, and reformulated.

To go through such a life altering experience, no matter how positive the change may be, can only provoke an enormous sense of loss and grief. So expect to feel it. Don't make yourself out to be wrong for feeling grief.

Don't be confused about the seeming paradox of mourning the passing of a very self-destructive part of who you are. For any passing is sad, any loss evokes a sense of grief.

Again, the formula for working through your feelings of grief is short and sweet. Acknowledge the feelings. Disclose those feelings with people who are able to support you and help you work through what you're feeling.

Pathfinder's Compass

- 1) Write about or discuss the feelings of loss that you're experiencing about no longer being able to consume alcohol and other drugs.
- 2) Write about or discuss the feelings of loss that you're experiencing about no longer being able to spend time with the people that you're no longer spending time with.
- 3) Write about or discuss the feelings of loss that you're experiencing about no longer being able to go to the places that you used to go to when you were consuming alcohol and other drugs.
- 4) Write about or discuss the feelings of loss that you're experiencing about no longer being able to do the activities that you used to do when you were consuming alcohol and other drugs.
- 5) Write about or discuss the feelings of loss that you experience about all that you no longer are able to experience that you did experience when you were consuming alcohol and other drugs.
- 6) Write about or discuss how you can cope with your feelings of grief as identified in steps #1, #2, #3, #4, and #5 in a way that will activate the process of

relapse.

- 7) Write about or discuss what impact the methods of coping that you identified in step #6 will have on your Recovery-based lifestyle.
- 8) Write about or discuss what impact the methods of coping that you identified in step #6 will have on your Recovery-based support system.
- 9) Write about or discuss step by step how the methods of coping that you identified in step #6 will activate the process of relapse.
- 10) Write about or discuss how you can best deal with your feelings of grief as identified in steps #1 through #5 by applying specific Recovery-based coping mechanisms.

The fifth emotion that we'll discuss is *loneliness*. Given what we've previously discussed about alienation, fear, and grief, you can understand why loneliness is an emotion that you'll often experience. Altering your life by saying good-bye to old habits, ending your involvement with people and places that are toxic to your emotional and spiritual well-being, opening yourself up to new ways of thinking, acting, and feeling, forsaking the security of your self-medicated isolation for active involvement in a Recovery-based support system all can leave you feeling disoriented and disconnected from your self and from all that is familiar to you.

Disconnected from people, places, and substances that provided you with a sense of the familiar, early Recovery leaves you feeling like a stranger in a foreign land. No longer able to connect with your old way of life, uncomfortable with the customs and ways of your new

way of life, unwilling to experience the sense of vulnerability that accompanies connecting with people when you're not under the influence of alcohol and other drugs, no longer able to phone home, you will feel cut off and alone. Of course, this is where I insert my advertisement for fellowshipping, but you can see another one of those ever-present Recovery paradoxes coming on, can't you? The cure for what ails you is *drinking the hair of the dog that bit you*. People. People. People. That's the cure but it's also the curse. But rest assured, it's what is necessary to protect and preserve your Recovery-based lifestyle. People. Support groups. Telephone calls.

Pathfinder's Compass

- 1) Write about or discuss three circumstances that awaken feelings of loneliness.
- 2) Write about or discuss three people that awaken feelings of loneliness.
- 3) Write about or discuss how you can cope with your feelings of loneliness identified in steps #1 and #2 in a way that will activate the process of relapse.
- 4) Write about or discuss what impact the methods that you identified in step #3 will have on your Recovery-based lifestyle.
- 5) Write about or discuss what impact the methods that you identified in step #3 will have on your Recovery-based support system.
- 6) Write about or discuss step by step how the methods that you identified in steps #3 and #4 will activate the process of relapse.
- 7) Write about or discuss how you can cope with your

feelings of loneliness identified in steps #1 and #2 of this exercise by applying specific Recovery-based coping mechanisms.

The sixth emotion that we'll discuss is *loss of control*. This is yet another Recovery paradox that you need to unravel. You've finally admitted that your consumption of alcohol and other drugs has made your life unmanageable. You've finally admitted that your consumption of alcohol and other drugs is out of control. So you decide to stop consuming alcohol and other drugs in order to make your life manageable once again, and boom, you run into a brick wall at every turn that you make.

It's likely that you've never felt more out of control now that you're newly abstinent from alcohol and other drugs. You can see how feeling out of control would pervade every waking moment of your day. After all, change begets loss of control. Loss begets loss of control. New begets loss of control. Fellowship begets loss of control. Abstinence begets loss of control. Needing somebody begets loss of control. Surrender begets loss of control. Prayer begets loss of control.

And how can you insulate yourself from feeling as out of control as Recovery makes you feel? Well, that never-ending mind-game—*letting go and letting God*, [re]connecting with your Higher Power, turning it over to a power greater than yourself, admitting that you're powerless over alcohol and other drugs, and surrender.

Pathfinder's Compass

- 1) Write about or discuss three circumstances that awaken feelings of loss of control.

- 2) Write about or discuss three people that awaken loss of control.
- 3) Write about or discuss how you can cope with your feelings of loss of control identified in steps #1 and #2 of this exercise in a way that will activate the process of relapse.
- 4) Write about or discuss what impact the methods that you identified in step #3 of this exercise will have on your Recovery-based lifestyle.
- 5) Write about or discuss what impact the methods that you identified in step #3 of this exercise will have on your Recovery-based support system.
- 6) Write about or discuss step by step how the methods that you identified in step #3 of this exercise will activate the process of relapse.
- 7) Write about or discuss how you can cope with your feelings of loss of control identified in steps #1 and #2 of this exercise by applying specific Recovery-based coping mechanisms.

The seventh emotion to be discussed is *resentment*. Remember, we discussed resentments in chapter 6, *Emotional Well-being: Making Peace With Yourself and The People in Your Life*. As you may already know, resentments are a luxury that a chemically dependent individual can ill afford to have. Resentments eat away at the core of your emotional and spiritual well-being. Resentments are the residue of unresolved issues that lay dormant in your life. Your resentments are the sum total of the insults and injuries, both real and imagined, that you carry with you through life.

Your resentments are the unfulfilled expectations that

you impose on life. The only way to protect yourself from being overwhelmed by resentment is to let go of the expectations that you have about what life owes you. The less expectations that you impose on life, the less reason there will be for you to feel disappointed about and ultimately resentful of life and what life brings your way.

Pathfinder's Compass

- 1) Write about or discuss three circumstances that awaken feelings of resentment.
- 2) Write about or discuss three people that awaken feelings of resentment.
- 3) Write about or discuss how you can cope with your resentments identified in step #1 of this exercise in a way that will activate the process of relapse.
- 4) Write about or discuss what impact the methods that you identified in step #3 of this exercise will have on your Recovery-based lifestyle.
- 5) Write about or discuss what impact the methods that you identified in step #3 of this exercise will have on your Recovery-based support system.
- 6) Write about or discuss step by step how the methods that you identified in step #3 of this exercise will activate the process of relapse.
- 7) Write about or discuss how you can cope with your resentments identified in steps #1 and #2 of this exercise by applying specific Recovery-based coping mechanisms.

The eighth emotion that we'll discuss is *shame*. Shame is an emotion that's a matrix of other emotions such as

worthless, inadequate, defective, self-loathing, and unlovable. Whether or not those feelings existed within you prior to your disease progressing to the extent that it has, it's likely that these feelings are part of your emotional landscape today.

Chemical dependency has taken its toll on your relationship with your self. There's much that you have to come to grips with about who you are and who you have been. There's much that you've done to yourself and others. You've compromised yourself and been compromised by those people who have exploited you for their own personal satisfaction and gain.

All of that has shaped and formed the feelings that you hold about yourself toward yourself. Again, without alcohol and other drugs to medicate these feelings, you may experience them as particularly harsh, raw, and ultimately, damning of yourself.

Here comes yet another paradox. The working through of shame is most effectively done through involvement with community rather than in a cloistered confessional setting. Claiming who you were and the deeds that you've done within the context of community is an act of healing. It also is an act of incredible courage!

Pathfinder's Compass

- 1) Write about or discuss three circumstances that awaken feelings of shame.
- 2) Write about or discuss three people that awaken feelings of shame.
- 3) Write about or discuss how you can cope with your feelings of shame identified in steps #1 and #2 of

this exercise that will most likely activate the process of relapse.

- 4) Write about or discuss what impact the methods that you identified in step #3 will have on your Recovery-based lifestyle.
- 5) Write about or discuss what impact the methods that you identified in step #3 will have on your Recovery-based support system.
- 6) Write about or discuss step by step how the methods that you identified in step #3 will activate the process of relapse.
- 7) Write about or discuss how you can best deal with your feelings of shame identified in steps #1 and #2 by applying specific Recovery-based coping mechanisms.

Your awakening feelings can be both a blessing and a curse. Your feelings are a blessing because it's sign that you're alive and that you're more connected than ever to your unfolding life. At the same time, many of these awakening feelings will be new and intense. Although that's problematic, it's not what the problem is. The problem occurs if you choose to not acknowledge and work through your awakening feelings. You'll need help with this but it's critical to your long-term well-being. Use your Recovery-based support system to help you work through what you're feeling. And if you feel like you need more help than your support system can provide, hire a qualified psychotherapist to help you work through the hurt, pain, and sorrow you experience.