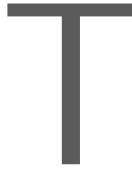


Coping Mechanisms



Faith

*When you have come to the edge of
all the light you know,
And are about to step off into the darkness
of the unknown,
Faith is knowing one of two things will happen:
There will be something solid to stand on, or you will
be taught how to fly.*

-John Upton

John Bradshaw tells the following story in his book, *Healing the Shame That Binds You*. There once was a man who was sentenced to die. He was blindfolded and put in a pitch-dark cave, 100 by 100 yards. He was told that there was a way out, and if he could find it, he would be free. After a rock was secured at the entrance, the prisoner was allowed to remove his blindfold and roam freely in the darkness. He was to be fed only bread and water for the first thirty days and nothing thereafter. The bread and water were lowered from a small hole in the roof at one end of the cave. The ceiling was 18 feet high. The opening was about a foot in diameter. The prisoner could see a faint light up above, but no light came in.

As the prisoner roamed around the cave, he bumped into rocks. Some were rather large. He thought that if he could build a high enough mound of rocks and dirt, he could reach the opening and enlarge it enough to crawl through. Since he was 5'9" and his reach was another two feet, he would have to make the pile at least 10 feet high.

So the prisoner spent his waking hours picking up rocks and digging up dirt. At the end of two weeks, he had built a mound of about six feet. He thought that if he could duplicate that in the next two weeks, he could make it before his food ran out. But as he had already used most of the rocks in the cave, he had to dig with his bare hands harder and harder.

After a month had passed, the mound was nine and one-half feet high. He could almost reach the opening by jumping upwards from the top of the mound. But jumping had been made very difficult because he was exhausted and extremely weak from nearly a month of digging.

One day, just as he thought he could touch the open-

ing, he fell hard to the bottom of the cave. He was simply too weak to get up and two days later he died.

Shortly thereafter, his captors came to get his body. They rolled away the huge rock that covered the entrance. As the light flooded into the cave, it illuminated an opening in the wall, three feet in circumference.

The opening was the opening to a tunnel that led to the other side of the mountain. This was the passage to freedom the prisoner had been told about. It was in the south wall directly under the opening in the ceiling. All the prisoner would have had to do was crawl about 200 feet and he would have found freedom. He had so completely focused on the opening of light that it never occurred to him to look for *freedom in the darkness*. Freedom was there all the time right next to the mound he was building but *it was in the darkness*.

Just like the man in the story above, you're a prisoner of your fears, habits, and ways of coping with the challenges in your life. You remain loyal to old familiar strategies for resolving the stressors in your life—no matter how self-defeating those strategies may be. Just like the man in the story above, you cling to the old and familiar rather than risk walking into the darkness of the unknown in order to find a way out of a situation.

But if you want to stay clean and sober, you won't have the luxury of sticking with your old tried and true ways of solving your problems. You won't be able to maintain your fidelity to those ways that make you feel safe. No longer may you be the *loyal soldier* to those methods of coping that enable you to feel as if you're in control of an out of control situation.

In order to stay clean and sober, you must learn how

to cope with those people and circumstances that pose a threat to your emotional, physical, and spiritual well-being. If you do not learn how to minimize the onset of personal stressors or eliminate the presence of personal stressors or alleviate the pain caused by the presence of the stressor, you'll be that much more vulnerable to activating the process of relapse. It's an inescapable truth of Recovery—you must learn new ways of coping with those people and circumstances that stress you out and overwhelm you. But if you're not willing to risk exploring in the darkness of the unknown for new ways of coping with the stressors in your life, your abstinence will likely suffer the same fate as our hero in the story above.

So what must you do to ensure that you don't experience the same fate as our hero in the story above? The second step in staying clean and sober is to end your reliance on self-sabotaging coping mechanisms and master the application of Recovery-based coping mechanisms to your personal stressors.

Self-sabotaging coping mechanisms are coping mechanisms that tend to be maladaptive and self-defeating. Instead of effectively managing and resolving personal stressors, self-sabotaging mechanisms tend to perpetuate the presence of activated stressors as well as the accompanying pain. On the other hand, Recovery-based coping mechanisms:

- 1) Prevent the onset of personal stressors
- 2) Minimize the onset of personal stressors
- 2) Eliminate an already activated personal stressor
- 3) Alleviate the discomfort created by the presence of an activated personal stressor

This is so important because ongoing exposure to

activated personal stressors and the resultant emotional and spiritual pain caused from such exposure can potentially activate the process of relapse. Whereas self-sabotaging coping mechanisms may provide short-term relief for the discomfort you may experience, they tend to do so at the expense of your long-term emotional and spiritual well-being. That's why it's imperative that you end your reliance on self-sabotaging coping mechanisms and master the application of Recovery-based coping mechanisms to both potential stressors and activated stressors.

In part 2 of this book you'll learn how to choose between self-sabotaging coping mechanisms and Recovery-based coping mechanisms. In chapter 9, we'll discuss the following eleven Recovery-based coping mechanisms.

Pathfinder's Checklist

Recovery-based coping mechanisms

- 1) Action
- 2) Assertiveness
- 3) Choices
- 4) Conflict resolution
- 5) Deliberation
- 6) *HOW*-Honesty-Openness-Willingness
- 7) Listening
- 8) Mentoring
- 9) Patience
- 10) Self-Examination
- 11) Spiritual practice

In chapter 10, we'll discuss self-sabotaging coping mechanisms listed on the following page.

Pathfinder's Checklist

Self-sabotaging coping mechanisms

- 1) Act-out feelings
- 2) Avoidance
- 3) Compartmentalize your life
- 4) Compulsive behaviors
- 5) Consume alcohol and other drugs
- 6) Denial
- 7) Impulsiveness
- 8) Isolation
- 9) Make Excuses
- 10) Stuff feelings
- 11) Willfulness

The material that we'll discuss in part 2 will suggest that you do things differently. For most of us, the suggestion to do things differently, to let go of the old and usher in the new can be an invitation to dig our heels in, cling to what's familiar, and resist allowing change to unfold. Don't allow your fear of letting go distract you from reading the material, doing the exercises, and applying what you're learning to your day-to-day life.

Just remember that you don't have to try my suggestions all at once nor do you have try my suggestions on anyone's timetable but your own. Although I believe that you'll discover that the Recovery-based coping mechanisms that we'll examine in part 2 will make your life infinitely better, that's a truth that you'll have to come to in your own time and your own way.