

Chapter 13

***R*elationships: How to Repair  
the Bridges With the People  
Who Matter Most**

T

*A tree is known by its fruit; a man by his deeds.  
A good deed is never lost; he who sows courtesy reaps  
friendship, and he who plants kindness gathers love.*

-Basil

*An important aspect* of Recovery is relationships. It's likely that while you were active in your disease you harmed many people in your life—either through neglect, deceit, deception, or abuse.

As you become more self-reflective, you may realize that you've always had problems with relationships. It may be that your ability to form loving, trusting relationships was compromised by the circumstances in which you were raised. It could be that you lacked the appropriate role models to show how people in healthy relationships behave towards each other.

Now that you're in Recovery, you'll discover that relationships are an important part of your Recovery as well as your spiritual practice. Your willingness to love and be loved by others is an important part of healing many of your emotional and spiritual wounds. This can best be accomplished by learning new skills that will empower you to repair the damage done to the people in your life.

Many of the relationship issues you'll need to address will be with family members. As you no doubt know by now, alcoholism and drug addiction are family diseases that profoundly impact family members. However, your denial about your disease has likely blinded you to the impact your disease has had on your family.

No matter how much you believed you hid your using from your family, it's likely you didn't do as good a job as you believed. Even when you weren't around them, they likely were concerned about your well-being.

And think about the times you *were* around them. What must that have been like for your family? Were you demanding, abusive, chaotic, and mercurial? Were you withdrawn, sullen, and unreachable? What impact did

your mood and behavior(s) have on your family? It's likely that they were careful not to set you off. *Walking on eggshells* is a phrase often used.

Think of the emotional chaos you caused by what your family endured—broken promises, pleading for money, stolen items, temper tantrums when you couldn't get your way, emotional manipulation. What impact did it have on your family? It's likely that even thinking about this makes you uncomfortable. No matter how you try to minimize the consequences of your disease, the truth is, there is much about how you treated others that you are not proud of. But Recovery is about taking responsibility for your actions, and this you shall do with your family.

It's likely you'll encounter different reactions from different family members as you try to heal the harm you've done to your relationships. In fact, don't be surprised if some friends and family care little if any about your attempts to get sober. They're more angry about the harm you've done than understanding Recovery and what you're attempting to do. If you encounter hostility, don't be surprised or discouraged. It's just one more instance where you have to practice acceptance—acceptance of the fact that you have harmed another person and don't have to change how they feel towards you.

Another trap that you and your family members have to be mindful of is the belief or hope that once you stop consuming alcohol and other drugs everything will be okay. This seldom is the case. Early Recovery can place a difficult strain on relationships.

The reason is not that difficult to understand. There is much that needs to be unlearned about how you related to your family and friends while active in your disease.

Patterns of communication were established, rigid roles were acted out, ways of expressing and avoiding emotional intimacy were relied on. Without alcohol and other drugs, you must master new patterns, new modes of communication and ways of expressing emotional intimacy.

The gap between unlearning old and learning new ways of relating to others can create emotional discomfort. You will likely feel lost and confused. Stripped of your old ways of relating and searching for new ways of connecting with the people in your life, you will feel like a newborn. This sense of being a fish out of water can be very disconcerting until you learn necessary skills.

Rebuilding your relationships begins with honesty. It's critical that you not attempt to end your discomfort by minimizing the hurt, anger, and disappointment your friends and family members may harbor towards you. It will be tempting to blame other people or circumstances for your past actions, but the truth is, there is much you need to take responsibility for.

One question that always arises around the issue of being honest is, *just how honest should I be?* The aim of being honest is to get everything out in the open. However, if in the name of being honest you may potentially harm another person, then it is best for you to consult with a fellow person in Recovery or a spiritual leader. Just remember, the point of rigorous honesty is to heal the wounds that exist between you and another person, not cause more harm.

As you try to rebuild the relationship bridges between you and your friends and family, you will experience inevitable tension. You are looking for forgiveness, acceptance, and trust. On the other hand, many of your friends

and family members will be skeptical of you and the changes you are making in your life. Whereas you are ready for things to be forgotten and forgiven, your friends are much slower to come around to your point of view. It is natural for you to feel discouraged when others remain cynical about your new-found attitudes toward life.

It is unreasonable to expect your friends to do a one hundred and eighty degree turn. Trust is something that can only be won back in time. Your word may be your bond to you, but you'll likely encounter fear, apprehension, and mistrust from your friends and family. Don't expect to get the checkbook back tomorrow. Don't expect your partner not to check up on you. Every word and action will be measured. That's just the way it is. That's the way it will be for quite some time.

Here's what you can do. Resent your friends and family members for doubting you or, accept the fact that you've harmed many people and their mistrust is a consequence of that harm. That doesn't mean it will be like this forever. It does mean it will be like this for now!

Sadly, in early Recovery, as hopeful as some things may appear to be, other things may appear hopeless. You may encounter relationships where there seems to be no hope of reconciliation. When things seem all but lost, it's tempting to want to throw away the relationship and move on with your life. Don't make any rash decisions. Your relationships need to experience a process of healing and regeneration. As I said earlier, there is much you need to unlearn and learn about how to be in a relationship with another person.

## Pathfinder's Checklist



*What you need to learn about being in a relationship with another person.*

- 1) Learn new communication skills.
- 2) Take responsibility for past actions.
- 3) Give relationships sufficient time to heal.
- 4) Develop new ways of expressing emotional intimacy.
- 5) Unlearn roles through which you related to people.

Remember, it's easy when you're feeling discouraged to throw in the towel and walk away from your relationships. Make sure you've explored every avenue possible before you decide to do that.

Even after you've tried everything, your partner may choose to leave the relationship. As hard as it may be for you to accept, it's important that you do just that—learn to accept their decision. Getting stuck in a cycle of trying to change their mind, resenting them for putting you in the position of having to change their mind, and acting-out that resentment may lead to relapse. It is times like these when you have to stop trying to control your partner's behavior and turn things over to your Higher Power.

If divorce is inevitable, try to make the transition as smooth as possible under the circumstances. To do so, follow these guidelines:

- 1) Stay out of the blame game.

- 2) Take responsibility for your actions.
- 3) If children are involved, remain a part of their lives.
- 4) Don't give-up your rights just because you feel responsible for the break-up.
- 5) Don't use divorce as an opportunity to punish your partner for leaving you.

Divorce is not the time to play make-up for your past misdeeds. Divorce is not the time to act-out your hurt and resentments. Divorce *is* the time for an ending and a new beginning. Neither an ending nor a new beginning can be achieved if you're still trying to make-up for your misbehavior or punish your partner for leaving you.

Let's shift our focus to the subject of new relationships. In early Recovery, this is an especially important topic. There's so much new that you're experiencing—feelings, interactions, perceptions, and attitudes. As exhilarating as it might be, at the same time it can be overwhelming and unsettling. There's nothing better than a new relationship to make things seem better and not have to focus on things in the solitude of your own company.

I've already discussed how relationships can become a danger to your Recovery when you use them to take the focus off yourself and your Recovery. That is why you'll hear experienced people in Recovery advise you to stay out of new romantic relationships for a year. By so doing, you will give yourself an opportunity to get [re]acquainted with you, learn some important relationship skills that will help you succeed at relationships when you do become involved with somebody, and develop the necessary sobriety skills that will enable you to remain sober.

In early Recovery, you've yet to develop the skills nec-

essary to participate in a healthy relationship. Your ability to be emotionally intimate has been severely handicapped by your long-term consumption of alcohol and other drugs. That is why early Recovery is the time to focus on you and your personal issues. Make a commitment to yourself. Don't self-destruct by wanting too much too fast. Follow the advice of people wiser and more experienced. Recognize your premature involvement in new relationships for what it is—one more short-sighted attempt to rely on an external source to make you feel better in the moment.

Your chronic consumption of alcohol and other drugs may have impacted your sex drive. As your mind, body, and spirit begin to heal, you will notice that your sex drive will return or increase. If you're not currently active in a sexual relationship, you'll need to cope with your awakening sexual feelings. It's best not to allow these awakening feelings to distract you from what's most important—remaining focused on Recovery. You know the reason why—the potential exists for you to lose yourself in a new relationship or in compulsive sexual acting-out. Losing yourself in other people or in sexual acting-out is a major trigger for relapse.

It can be difficult to accept that no matter how capable you are in other areas of your life, it's unlikely that you are as skilled at relationships as you will be one day. You're just beginning at so much. Relationships are one of those things.

Like many people in early Recovery, you need to master the art of friendship before you jump into the arena of love. At this early stage of the game, your active pursuit of romance and sex enhances your vulnerability for

relapse rather than life long fulfillment.

For those of you who are currently in a relationship, caution is still the watchword. It's likely that your consumption of alcohol and other drugs and sexual behavior have been closely related for years. Sex without being under the influence of alcohol and other drugs is a whole new experience. You may discover that you feel apprehensive having sex while sober. It may be your experience that having sex sober is more stressful than pleasurable.

Having sex without the involvement of alcohol and other drugs may awaken feelings within you that have long been masked by your consumption of alcohol and other drugs. It would not be unusual for you to feel inhibited sexually without being under the influence. You may believe that your ability to perform is greatly compromised without alcohol and other drugs. Any of these or all of these can make sex a burden rather than a joy. And if you're unable to work through these issues with your partner, you may find yourself retreating rather than rebuilding your relationship.

Until the politics of your relationship are resolved, you'll discover that the bedroom is not off limits from the indiscretions you committed while active in your disease. If you've been unable to respect the desires of your partner prior to starting Recovery, it's unlikely that you'll magically start to respect your partner's desires now. Until you heal the wounds in your relationships, it's unlikely that sex with your partner won't be affected as well.

As you can see from the wide range of topics discussed in this chapter, your Recovery is very much affected by how you go about healing the harm that you've done to the people in your life. Your relationships hold

the potential for much healing and forgiveness if things go well. At the same time, your relationships can be potential emotional minefields that put your sobriety, emotional and spiritual well-being, and long-term Recovery in jeopardy. The best advice I can give you is to take it easy, take it slow, be patient with the reactions you get from your friends and family members, and remember, the people in your life owe you nothing!