

Chapter 9

*F*eelings and Sobriety: How to
Safely [Re]claim Your Feelings

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*To gain that which is worth having, it may
be necessary to lose everything else.*

-Bernadette Devlin

It's likely that you're not comfortable talking about what's troubling you and the accompanying feelings. As an alternative to talking about your feelings, you may have used alcohol and other drugs to cope with your emotions. As a result, your ability to deal with your feelings in a responsible way has been severely compromised.

That is why learning how to talk about your emotions is an important skill for long-term sobriety. Your inability to effectively articulate what you're feeling will leave you vulnerable to consuming alcohol and other drugs as a means of coping with your emotions.

In practical terms this means that you need to share your feelings with other people. By sharing feelings such as fear, sadness, anger, and shame, you can lighten your load. Expressing your feelings will unburden you, and enable you to receive feedback and support from others.

There's a saying I encourage people to think about when they're needing support and reassurance—*My head is a dangerous neighborhood to be in alone*. Being involved with other people and feeling more comfortable opening up to them will enable you to stay out of the storms that are always brewing in your head, and remain involved in the present moment—where life is most effectively lived.

As you begin to express your feelings to others, you may discover that you need to frequently discuss what you're feeling in order to keep yourself grounded and out of your head. Not only will it be important for you to frequently express what you're feeling, it will be equally important for you to listen to the feedback people offer. By being open to what others have to offer you about a troubling situation, you'll be able to benefit from the wisdom of others who have experienced what you now

struggle with.

Pathfinder's Checklist



Skills to help you effectively cope with your emotions.

- 1) Get out of your head by expressing your emotions.
- 2) Maintain realistic expectations of yourself.
- 3) Practice HOW—Honesty, Openness, Willingness.
- 4) Don't hesitate to ask for help.
- 5) Develop a support system that will empower you to speak openly.
- 6) Check in with your support system on a regular basis.
- 7) Identify those people, places, and circumstances that are the source of your chronic negative feelings and make necessary changes as identified by you and your support system.
- 8) Use the services of professionals to help you learn how to talk about your emotions.

An important part of the emotional work you'll do in Recovery is working with unresolved anger. Anger itself is a normal human emotion. It is a normal emotional response to situations in which you feel threatened, treated unfairly, or violated.

However, unresolved anger serves as a trigger for chronic consumption of alcohol and other drugs. The aftereffect of unresolved anger—resentment—is a luxury you can't afford. Resentment keeps you stuck in your

internal feeling of being wronged. Resentment is the emotion you utilize to hold on to your perceived wrongs. This enables you go through life indulging your sense of righteous indignation.

By blaming others for having wronged you, you're able to hold onto your resentments and avoid having to look at yourself. In so doing, you place yourself in a morally superior position—holding other people responsible for how you're feeling. This runs completely counter to what we discussed in Chapter 8, *Feelings and Sobriety: How to Identify Your Feelings*—you and your belief system are responsible for what you're feeling.

Let's look a little closer at anger—both as a positive and negative energy. Anger is an energizer. As a survival mechanism, anger is a call to action. It mobilizes you to act in the moment to escape physical and/or emotional harm. It mobilizes you in the long-run to give yourself to causes that serve to right the wrongs of society. Anger can be a source of motivation for change. Sick and tired of being sick and tired, you may finally change jobs, leave a relationship or stop your consumption of alcohol and other drugs.

On the other hand, anger can be a negative force in your life. When anger is a reaction to people and circumstances that threaten your self-centered, entitled ways, it's likely that you feel anger and strike back. Anger can be provoked by any number of situations. For instance:

- 1) You may experience anger in situations that make you feel out of control. When things don't happen the way you believe they should, you may feel angry.
- 2) You may experience anger in situations where you

feel threatened. In these instances you use anger as a defense to keep people at arm's length, to intimidate people or to get your way.

- 3) You may express anger in situations as a way of masking other emotions such as sadness, grief, vulnerability, or powerlessness.
- 4) You may experience anger in situations where another person's anger frightens you.

The importance of these different scenarios is that when you experience the negative aspects of anger, you are more vulnerable to relapse if you don't cope with your anger in a healthy manner.

There can be harmful consequences when you express your anger improperly. This is because you may set into motion a cycle that makes a situation worse rather than better by mismanaging your angry feelings.

For example, you may perceive that a person has treated you unfairly or a situation has developed that leaves you feeling out of control. If you're unable to identify your anger and properly resolve the circumstance that is upsetting you, your unresolved anger may serve as a catalyst for the following chain of events.

Unresolved anger transforms into resentment. As your resentment(s) build up inside you, you may try to deal with your resentments in the following ways:

- 1) You deny that you are affected by your anger. At this point, you cope with your anger by stuffing it and pretending it doesn't exist. The problem with this coping mechanism is that your anger leaks out in other ways.
- 2) You attempt to get even with your perceived antagonist. You may attempt to right a wrong. The

problem with this is that attempting to solve a problem with aggression inevitably inflames rather than resolves the situation.

- 3) You may use alcohol and other drugs to medicate your emotions.

Hopefully you can see that none of these responses resolves your anger; they merely serve to sustain it. You remain preoccupied with your anger. This only intensifies your feelings. As your anger intensifies, you will likely take it out on others. This may take the form of the following avenues of expression:

- 1) Anger at the world in general because you can no longer use alcohol and other drugs.
- 2) Anger at your family and friends for having insisted that you stop consuming alcohol and other drugs.
- 3) Anger at yourself for having wasted much of your life on alcohol and other drugs.
- 4) Anger at your Higher Power because life is so unfair.

Instead of dumping your anger on everybody else, let's see if there's a better way to express it. Effectively dealing with anger involves good detective work. You may need to ask yourself, *How old is the anger I'm feeling? Who am I dumping my anger on? Does this anger reveal that I want something done my way?* The point of your detective work is to understand the cause of your anger in order to effectively deal with it. For instance:

- 1) If the source of your anger is an irrational belief, apply the techniques we discussed in Chapter 8, *Feelings and Sobriety: How to Identify Your Feelings*.
- 2) If the source of your anger has a rational basis, you

can express to the source of your anger what you are feeling. Use sentences that start off, "When you act in this manner, I feel..." Be mindful of not raising your voice or acting in a threatening fashion.

- 3) If the source of your anger is a current situation, resolve it or stop participating in it.
- 4) You can talk to others about what you're feeling. Venting provides a release and provides an opportunity for you to receive feedback from others.
- 5) Sometimes you have to practice acceptance. You have to accept that unfairness and injustice can't always be corrected.

Let's do an exercise to practice working with your anger. We'll use the same strategy as we used in Chapter 8, *Feelings and Sobriety: How to Identify Your Feelings*.

Pathfinder's Exercise



- 1) Write down three resentments you are holding and to whom they're directed.
 - a) Resentment...
To whom the resentment is directed...
 - b) Resentment...
To whom the resentment is directed...
 - c) Resentment...
To whom the resentment is directed...
- 2) Pick one of those resentments and apply the same strategy as the one we used in Chapter 8, *Feelings*

and Sobriety: How to Identify Your Feelings.

A is the Action or event in your resentment.

B is the Belief embedded in your resentment.

C is the Consequence or feeling(s) as a result of your irrational belief.

- 3) Look at your belief. What is the theme of your belief? *I must be in control* or *Life should be fair* or *I should not show my anger*.
- 4) How can you challenge your irrational beliefs that are making you feel angry.

Please remember the following formula about unresolved anger: unresolved anger leads to resentments, resentments lead to consuming alcohol and other drugs.

Let's examine another emotion that's important to cope with in Recovery—fear. Fear, like anger, is a normal emotion. However, if you allow fear to control your life, then fear can be a major detriment to abstinence.

Fear is a dominant emotion you'll experience in early Recovery. Everything is new. Everything you've come to rely on is untested. You're required to leave much of what is familiar and comforting to you behind.

In the past you managed your fear by consuming alcohol and other drugs. Your ability to control as much as you could also helped alleviate your fears. But once you admitted you were powerless, you had to face your fears. Some of the common fears you'll experience in early Recovery are:

- 1) Living life free of all mood-altering substances.
- 2) Changing or losing relationships.
- 3) Facing the unknown of what lies ahead of you.
- 4) Reconciling your actions from the past.
- 5) Living openly and honestly with others.

So how best to cope with your fears?

Pathfinder's Checklist



How to cope with your fears.

- 1) Accept your fears as normal.
- 2) Live one day at a time.
- 3) Tackle problems one at a time.
- 4) Develop a spiritual practice.
- 5) Learn how to bring balance to your life.
- 6) Structure your day with constructive activities.
- 7) Do volunteer or service work.

Lets' work with your fears by applying the technique we first discussed in Chapter 8, *Feelings and Sobriety: How to Identify Your Feelings*.

Pathfinder's Exercise



- 1) Write down your three biggest fears in Recovery.
- 2) Examine the irrational beliefs associated with your fears by doing the following ABC exercise.
 A is the Action or event in your fear.
 B is the Belief embedded in your fear.
 C is the Consequence or feeling(s) as a

result of your irrational belief.

3) What can you do to cope with the fears you've articulated?

The next emotion I want to discuss is shame. Do you criticize yourself? Do you constantly beat yourself up?

When you find yourself fanning the flames of your emotions with self-judgment and criticism, you create an internal atmosphere of self-loathing. By evoking feelings of self-hate and shame, you make yourself vulnerable to consuming alcohol and other drugs to medicate the emotional pain.

It's easy to see why that would be so. If you feel worthless, humiliated, and full of shame, why would you even want to put the energy into taking care of yourself? Even though you know that chemical dependency is a disease, it's likely that a part of you believes that you're a bad person for having this disease.

Believing you're worthless, uncomfortable with being seen by others as weak or sick, you become overwhelmed with shame. Shame is a destructive emotional state. Shame reveals that you believe yourself to be fundamentally flawed.

Being grounded in shame creates feelings of despair and self-hatred. It convinces you of the futility of trying to remain sober. Shame keeps you isolated and cut off from the support you so richly deserve. Fearful of being rejected, you keep your feelings bottled up inside. All of this hampers your Recovery and makes you vulnerable to relapse.

The paradox of shame and how it isolates you is that you need interactions with other people to heal the wounds created by your shame. Talking to other people

will help normalize most of the feelings bottled up inside. You'll also discover that the more open you are, the more positive responses you'll get from other people.

As you open to sharing yourself with other people and experiencing their positive response, you'll begin to discover that the belief that you're worthless is a subjective perception rather than an empirical fact.

A final consideration when dealing with shame is examining your expectations of yourself. When you find that you're judging yourself mercilessly or feeling inadequate, stop and examine how realistic you are in your expectations of yourself and the criteria you've created by which you judge yourself. By readjusting your expectations, you can effectively manage the amount of shame you evoke within yourself. Just remember, more times than not the problem is your expectations, not you.

Let's examine shame using the exercise from Chapter 8, *Feelings and Sobriety: How to Identify Your Feelings*.

Pathfinder's Exercise



- 1) List two events that you feel shame about. Explore those feelings with another person who is in Recovery. What did you learn from talking to another person about your shame?
- 2) Examine your irrational beliefs associated with those events.

A is the Action or event that your shame is about.

B is the Belief embedded in your feeling of shame.

C is the Consequence or feeling(s) as a result of your irrational belief.

- 3) What does your belief system tell you about the circumstance that precipitates your shame?
- 4) Is your belief valid or not?

The final emotion I want to examine with you is grief. As you know, grief is the emotion you experience as a result of experiencing loss in your life.

Grief is stimulated by any loss—person, place, thing, or situation. Anybody who stops consuming alcohol and other drugs inevitably experiences grief associated with no longer using alcohol and other drugs.

How intensely you mourn the loss of something is associated with how intensely you were attached to the object you've lost. It's not important that other people understand why you feel the sense of grief you may be feeling. It's only important that you're able to recognize grief when you experience it.

Grieving is not a static event but a dynamic process in which you experience different stages. It is something you experience to work through. The stages of grief are:

- 1) Denial of the loss.
- 2) Anger about the loss.
- 3) Bargaining as an attempt to regain the object you've lost.
- 4) Depression as you begin to accept that the object you've lost is truly gone.
- 5) Accepting the reality of the loss and moving on with your life.

Acceptance does *not* mean that your feelings about

the loss go away. Thoughts and reminders about the object you've lost will still evoke feelings of sadness or longing. Don't equate acceptance with elimination of feelings.

The danger of not resolving grief is that you can remain stuck in your grief. This is dangerous, for it can leave you frozen in anger, abandonment, resentment, or denial. The longer you remain stuck in a stage of grief, the more enmeshed you will become with unresolved emotions that can eventually sabotage your Recovery. Remember, time alone does not heal all wounds, it takes time *and attention* to heal your emotional and spiritual wounds.

One loss you must deal with is the loss of your best friend—alcohol and other drugs. Acknowledging the truth about your alcohol and other drug problems will initially stimulate feelings of anger. It's only natural—the thought of facing life without the comfort of alcohol and other drugs can be a scary proposition at best—a scary proposition best masked by anger. A natural reaction to facing the loss of alcohol and other drugs initially is to bargain, strike a deal, figure out a way to use once in a while. Eventually, you'll be confronted with the reality that you're powerless over your consumption of alcohol and other drugs—meaning it's all or nothing; you either drink and drug in an out of control fashion or you remain abstinent from all mood-altering substances. This realization stimulates a feeling of sadness or even depression.

By working in Recovery and learning about chemical dependency, the anger, bargaining, and sadness eventually transform into acceptance. And with acceptance, you begin to feel emotionally clean about your choice to stop

consuming alcohol and other drugs.

Let's do an exercise to help you examine your issues about loss.

Pathfinder's Exercise



- 1) List some significant losses in your life.
- 2) Which losses have been the most painful?
- 3) Identify the stages of grief you've experienced about each listed loss.
- 4) How can you begin to accept the losses you've experienced?
- 5) Discuss your feelings with another person.

The following daily journal exercise is an important method you can use to examine your emotions.

Choose a significant event in your day that triggered an emotional reaction. Examine that event in the context of the following questions.

- 1) Write down the details of what happened during the incident.
- 2) Identify the feelings the event triggered in you.
- 3) What does your reaction to the event reveal about you?
- 4) How can you change your emotional reaction to the event?

As you practice dealing with your feelings keep the following in mind.

Pathfinder's Checklist



What to be mindful of as you learn how to cope with your feelings.

- 1) Talk about your feelings.
- 2) Deal with dangerous emotions by using coping and communication skills.
- 3) Be on the lookout for anger, fear, shame, and grief. These emotions are present often in early Recovery.
- 4) Honesty with yourself and others helps you change your perceptions about yourself.
- 5) It is natural to feel grief from experiencing the loss of your alcohol and other drugs.
- 6) Use the daily journal technique described above to remain emotionally clean.