

# BEYOND ABSTINENCE

*Sobriety*  
*Relapse*

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Many abstinent alcoholics show signs of stagnation, resentment, and a general unhappiness that may be related to the cessation of personal striving. Counselors and other caretakers must be trained to help recovered alcoholics through the crucial phase of realizing and rechanneling their own creative energies.

A study of the abstinent alcoholic conducted by Gerard, Saenger, and Wile (1962) indicates that the majority of abstinent alcoholics are not functioning effectively in life even though they have achieved sobriety. Of those sober, 54 percent were reported to be overtly disturbed and 24 percent were considered to be living life inadequately. Some 12 percent were termed "AA successes" but had achieved little or no social life or identity apart from Alcoholics Anonymous. Only the remaining 10 percent were considered to be achieving a state of self-respecting independence, personal growth, and/or self-realization. These 10 percent were reported to be more alive and interesting, and engaged in a variety of interactions on the basis of personal interest. Resentment and aggression, so noticeable in the other groups, were not

observed among these independent successes. Thus, it appears that the recovering alcoholic often sells himself short, thinking that sobriety is enough—as though abstinence were a good place to "just settle in."

## Changing Passivity

Abraham Maslow's studies of self-actualizing people (1968, 1971) have taught us what most people can be like if they continue to evolve toward health. From studying healthy people, it has been learned that passivity blocks creative growth and good self-feeling. Transmuting passivity into actions that utilize one's inherent creative energies is the key to healthy growth. Like a muscle that atrophies when not used, creative energy goes slack if it lies fallow.

Through the process of growing toward self-actualization and health, a hierarchical progression of needs is encountered, starting with physiological needs and progressing through safety needs, belongingness, self-esteem, and self-actualization. The ability to meet the needs of the lowest, most fundamental level must be acquired before one can seek out the satisfaction of the next

level. Maslow's hierarchy of needs has resulted in a whole new psychology of motivation that has won wide acceptance.

Instead of successfully learning to fulfill and transcend the needs of each level, many get stuck, hurt, or frightened—and retreat. This may develop into a habit of retreating, which then creates a mind-set and a philosophy of defeat. Since growth depends on taking risks, serious trouble begins at this point of passivity. By frustrating the life energies that must move forward, man regresses into self-defeating, unproductive attempts to live satisfactorily. Vital energy has to "grow" into activity, or it becomes bottled up, festering like a sore.

Counselors and other helpers must be trained to lead alcoholic clients through the helping process toward self-actualization (Wolf 1977). There are three distinct stages in the helping process: (a) an inward-downward stage, (b) an integrating stage, and (c) an upward-outward stage.

### Stage One

For clients, Stage One is characterized primarily by catharsis—the releasing of pent-up emotions. During this inward-downward phase, clients need to feel comfortable, trusting, and secure enough to let go. They must work with their feelings and explore painful material in order ultimately to resolve their problems. The emphasis in this stage is on retrospection—looking backwards in an attempt to ferret out situations and emotions sometimes associated

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with traumatic experiences. During this stage, clients are often resistant to deep exploration because of their fear of being overwhelmed by their feelings and of discovering "monsters" that they fear lie buried in their own psychic caverns. The counselor can best help by being supportive, patient, understanding, and warm. He must help clients come to grips with the charged issues and conflicts which exist in their deeper levels of consciousness.

It is during Stage One that clients feel most vulnerable and dependent. The counselor can help the client accept this dependency and discover that vulnerability is not synonymous with abuse. Many clients resist letting go and opening up because they feel it is too dangerous and frightening since they often have been hurt, abused, and manipulated during such periods of vulnerability. Thus, the way a counselor deals with resistance will determine how deeply the client will explore the reservoir of emotionally charged issues that lie at the basis of his current problems. As the client develops trust, as the counselor demonstrates competence, understanding, and genuine concern for the welfare of the client, the client will probe even deeper into himself and catharsis will occur.

### Stage Two

This stage is characterized by the client's acquiring insight. While clients continue to express their emotions and catharsis still occurs, sometimes explosively, it is in this stage that the most important insights, self-discoveries, and revelations for the client take place. Deep self-exploration produces profound self-awareness. Socrates admonished, "Know thyself," because deep understanding of ourselves is essential if self-mastery is to be achieved. The focus in Stage Two remains on the past, and clients often discover cause-and-effect relationships, themes, and patterns that have led to present difficulties. In time, the core of the client's problems will become ever more conscious. This is an "Aha!" stage for the client (sometimes it's not only

"Aha!" but also "Oh, no!"), and a time of deep self-revelation.

The counselor may be ever more empathetic and active in Stage Two because the client's resistance has been diminished. Thus, clients accept the questions, hunches, and hypotheses of the counselor readily in this stage, and this facilitates the client's probing and self-discovery. In this stage, the attunement between counselor and client may become so intense that the counselor can practically experience the client's world and communicate that understanding to the client both verbally and nonverbally.

### Stage Three

Stage Three for clients is a time for experimentally venturing forward, transmuting their previous insights and emotional purging into risk-taking attempts at growth. The emphasis switches from the past to the here-and-now as clients let go of old, destructive, self-defeating behavior and habits in an attempt to find new, more adaptive means for living life effectively. In this stage, the counselor is required to be ever more confronting. For example, dependent feelings in the clients now must be challenged as the counselor facilitates his client's growth toward emotional independence, stability, and competence.

Signs that indicate that clients are moving into Stage Three include the following processes:

1. *Fear is transmuted into courage.* The



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clients, sick and tired of being sick and tired, move toward situations and circumstances that they have avoided in the past because of fear. They begin to take on and challenge fears by steady attempts at tolerating discomfort and working through obstacles. Clients exercise their courage muscles by steadily increasing the load, delving into situations that make them uncomfortable but do not overwhelm. Soon, clients develop the habit of moving toward anxiety-laden situations rather than trying to escape from or avoid them. Life becomes an adventure for clients in this stage.

2. *Hostility is transmuted into forgiveness.* The authors have never witnessed a client ventilate himself free of hostility. Clients do not appear able to beat enough mattresses, scream enough screams, or curse enough people to get free from the hostility that binds them to those they hate. Hatred shackles people to those they loathe. It is only when clients can get beyond hostility and discover the freedom that compassion and forgiveness provide that they can move toward becoming more self-actualizing. The clients we have seen who are most successful are those who can develop a compassionate indifference toward those who have hurt them.

3. *Self-pity is transmuted into personal responsibility.* Self-pity is poison. Feeling that fate has dealt us cruel blows, that we don't deserve our problems, that others are responsible for our difficulties, and developing a "Why me?" syndrome can result in a deep depression for individuals who become extremely bitter because of their lot in life. Sooner or later, all must discover that we are intimately involved in creating our own destinies. Self-actualizing individuals learn that their most difficult problems and their most painful experiences are often their greatest teachers. As clients become ever more aware of their own contributions to their own problems, refrain from blaming others, and seek to control their own lives by working with themselves, they become more self-confident and emotionally stable.

4. *Depression is transmuted into op-*



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*timism*. There seem to be five components of depression: (a) fear, (b) hostility, (c) self-pity, (d) futility, and (e) entrapment. If any of the five pillars of depression are dislodged, the entire structure crumbles. If a client will confront fear, let go of hostility, give up the poison of self-pity, depression cannot be maintained. As a person discovers that his efforts are not futile, that he can make changes in the way he feels, thinks, and lives, he will no longer feel hopeless or trapped. Depression, then, will be seen in its true light, its emotional components ferreted out and altered, and clients will become optimistic and hopeful.

### Self-Exploration

Many studies indicate that the depth of self-exploration in clients is correlated with indices of improvement (Truax and Carkhuff 1967; Carkhuff and Berenson 1967). The deeper people explore themselves, the more likely they are to free themselves from suffering. However, both self-exploration and action must be employed if people are to move toward greater self-actualization. Self-exploration excluding action will not result in permanent growth because the client's self-defeating behavior must be changed. On the other hand, if behavior is simply changed, without an accompanying understanding and emotional freedom, the client may find that history repeats itself as his problems reappear.

The self-actualizing individual provides vital clues as to how we may live life effec-

tively. In the past, psychologies have been developed by generalizing from the observations of our most crippled, stunted people. By studying healthy people, Maslow and his followers have shown what people can be when they function well. Some important characteristics follow.

### Self-Actualizing Traits

*Time Competence:* Self-actualized individuals have learned to live primarily in the here-and-now, that is, their consciousness is anchored in the present moment. They have learned to inhibit needless ruminations about the past or fearful anticipations about the future. People play games with their own minds, and these destructive ways of thinking produce anxiety, depression, guilt, anger, and other negative feelings. The games to which we refer are the "if only" and/or the "what if" games. The "if only" game takes people into the past about what might have happened; the "what if" game is the reverse, conjuring up possible negative future situations. In either case, a person's consciousness is adversely affected by these fantasies, and the present moment of life is lost to these fantasies and may cause incredible pain.

*Inner Direction:* The healthy individual learns to make his own decisions autonomously. He resists influence by dominating individuals and those who attempt to invoke guilt, fear, anger, or in other ways try to interfere with the self-actualizer's free will.

*Devotion to a Cause:* Although self-actualizers are inner-directed, they are other-centered as well. Their interests spill over onto others. They possess a strong love for mankind and are often involved in altruistic causes which express their true purpose in life.

*Acceptance of the Human Condition:* Tolerant of others as well as of themselves, self-actualizing individuals can accept their own weaknesses and humanness and, therefore, can accept the weaknesses and humanness of others.

*Good and Evil:* Self-actualizers have a



strong sense of good and evil, but not necessarily as defined by society's values. They tend to trust their own "inner voice" for guidance about moral issues, rather than to lean heavily on dogma or external rules.

**Creativity:** Creativity in the self-actualizer is multifaceted. Instead of writing great books, composing great music, or becoming famous artists, though they may do any of these things, they tend to bring an element of unique style and creativity into all of their activities. It is as though their own special kind of expression is projected to all aspects of the world.

**Dichotomy Transcending:** One of the most vivid and important distinctions between the self-actualizing individual and the average person is a characteristic labeled "dichotomy transcending." The healthy person no longer views the world in black and white. Polar opposites such as work or play, childish or mature, heart or head, spiritual or sensual, detached or involved tend to merge and become a third or higher phenomenon. The usual conflict between the two opposite forces is no longer felt as conflict, but as something entirely new and often surprising, as though the two have united.

**Peak Experiences:** Mystical experiences are fairly common for some self-actualizers, but not for all. They have moments wherein they perceive limitless horizons opening up to their vision with the feeling of being simultaneously more powerful and helpless than ever before. In addition, there is the profound conviction accompanying the peak experience that something extremely important and valuable had happened so that the individual is to some extent transformed and strengthened even in his daily life.

Non-peaking self-actualizers also exemplify super-health characteristics. The difference between the non-peakers and the peakers seems to be along the lines of personal style. Non-peakers tend to be practical, logical, efficient thinkers, and are highly represented among the social world improvers. The peakers are more likely to be writing society's philosophy, religion,

and poetry. The peakers tend to transcend into everyday life, while the non-peakers seem content just to live every day of life effectively. Both types of self-actualizers are models of healthy, effective living.

**Interpersonal Relationships:** In studying healthy people, Maslow found a difference in the way they view interpersonal relationships. They tend to have very few close friends, but these friendships are of great depth and intensity. Self-actualizers seem to learn from anyone in a rather democratic fashion. They do not seem to notice societal differences that are to the average person so very obvious and important.

### Conclusion

It needs to be stated that the self-actualizing individual is not perfect; he is merely a statement of what man can be when operating at his healthiest level. In fact, to avoid disillusionment with human nature entirely, it is important that we realize that there are no perfect people. But there are, as we have seen, some who are more healthy than others. As Maslow observed, there are among us certain sages and saints, movers and shakers. Uncommon as they may be, they are our hope for the future of man. These are persons who have learned to live life effectively, people who have begun letting go of the more disastrous defenses and taking on characteristics that enhance growth.

For the alcoholic individual, abstinence is only the beginning. As he overcomes his dependence on alcohol and remembers again to live, he will need healthy companions to guide or accompany him on his journey toward health. The self-actualizer can serve as a model for those of us who continue to search for a better way.

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