

Introduction

THIS IS A BOOK OF GREAT HOPE. ITS PURPOSE IS TO ASSIST women in their recovery from chemical dependency.

Addiction is messy. Very messy. Like a hurricane, it leaves massive devastation in its path. The addict spins helplessly at the mercy of the storm, losing peace of mind and self-respect. She may even lose her friends, loved ones, reputation, job, health, freedom, or life. Those closest to her—family, friends, co-workers or schoolmates, community members, and others—helplessly watch her self-destruction, deeply pained over their inability to stop it. Meanwhile, they may pay dearly for her lies, failures, cruelty, and recklessness. So does society as a whole. The hurricane of addiction is no respecter of persons. It hurts those in its path and even those nearby. No one escapes unscathed.

The good news is that, despite the terrible devastation of addiction, many women have found a way out. There is a solution! Regardless of their drug of choice, lifestyle, mental and physical concerns, economic concerns, sexual orientation, race, culture, religion, or other differences, women are able to achieve freedom from the mess of addiction. If you're a woman whose use of alcohol or other drugs is creating havoc in your life—even in small ways—you'll find hope in these pages. If you're a person who cares about an addict, this book will help you understand why it's so hard for her to stop using and assure you that she can recover.

Although this book is written for women, it's not meant to be

exclusive or to create a separation between women and men. In fact, the core elements of addiction and recovery are the same for every addict, male or female. For that reason, addiction is often called the great equalizer. Yet, just as we take into account many other factors in dealing with someone's addiction and recovery, so must we consider the person's gender.

Certain issues unique to women affect how they become addicted and how they recover. Women get started down the addiction path for different reasons than men do. Their addiction progresses faster, and generally their body and spirit have suffered more damage by the time they're at the door of recovery. In addition, women typically touch more lives by their addiction since they are often expected to be the central stabilizing force in their families and communities. And women work on their recovery differently than men do. Because of their innate desire for connection, many women find that recovery is a natural process for them. All of these reasons have inspired the creation of this book to offer information and support to women.

A Woman's Guide to Recovery shows how women who have been nearly destroyed by addiction find their way out of the mess. It includes many stories of women who have found recovery,* condensed from interviews with them. These stories are diverse, representing various drugs of choice, ages, cultures, ethnic backgrounds, socioeconomic situations, and living circumstances. They are breathtaking and almost unbelievable. Courageous women reveal how they moved from the despair of addiction to a life of freedom, strength, and accomplishment. Their stories are dispersed throughout the book at the ends of chapters. While a story may touch on the themes of the chapter in which it is located, it is not meant to correspond to or illustrate all points in that particular chapter. It is meant simply to illustrate one woman's way out of ad-

* Names have been changed to protect anonymity.

diction. Quotes from the interviews are also sprinkled throughout the book. These powerful words show that there is no one way out of addiction, just as there is no one way of becoming addicted or living with addiction. There is a way out for every woman who is willing. That's a promise. If you're struggling with addiction and hope seems way out of reach, try reading the story sections of this book first. They will open the way to hope.

This book also offers hope to those who love an addicted woman. Many women who are addicted are so lost in their chemicals that they can't recognize the pain they're in and aren't able to seek help by themselves. It may be a friend or family member who first picks up this book. For addicts and for the caring people in their lives, this book provides an important and honest perspective on addiction and, more important, the hope of recovery. After reading this book, you will have a deeper understanding of addiction as the powerful force it is, and you will know without a doubt that recovery is very possible for those willing to take one step at a time. You'll also find some direction for what your next step needs to be.

Addiction doesn't typically happen overnight, and neither does recovery. Recovery is built on knowledge and acceptance and ultimately a commitment. Learning about addiction is a good way to start this process. An addict typically thinks she's the only one who would do such crazy things, so she lives a life of secrecy. One of the first gifts for a woman in recovery is discovering that she's not alone. Women in recovery find out that many other women have gone down that dark spiral of addiction, women who also have terrible secrets and have done horrible things. Yet they have climbed out of the pit and are living a life that is beyond their wildest dreams. Learning about addiction and seeing that others have done similar things is immensely helpful in the healing process.

A Woman's Guide to Recovery offers the opportunity to learn not only about addiction, but more important, about recovery. It

discusses certain basic principles that work over and over. Some key ideas about addiction and recovery will be repeated at numerous points throughout the book. The repetition not only reinforces important ideas but also assists readers who experience memory struggles, which is very common in early recovery.

One of the most basic points that bears repetition is that recovery starts when women put the chemicals down—when they stop using them. This can't be done alone. It requires the help of others. When a woman finally puts the chemicals down, she usually feels a deep emptiness inside herself. Something is needed to replace the good feelings the chemicals provided. Recovery is about filling that empty place and building a content and meaningful life without chemicals.

Although women recover in a number of ways, the emphasis in *A Woman's Guide to Recovery* will be on an approach called the Twelve Steps. Twelve Step programs such as Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous are available throughout the world, and many addicts have found freedom through them. They are based on principles that are also at the heart of other ways people get sober. These principles are used in Twelve Step groups, but they are also used in some faith-based programs and in other processes and support systems that help people recover.

The Twelve Step programs use as their basic guidebooks *Alcoholics Anonymous*, *Narcotics Anonymous*, and other time-tested literature to help people learn about addiction and recovery. *A Woman's Guide to Recovery* is built around many of the principles taught in this literature. Because most of the older books and pamphlets on Twelve Step recovery were written by men and were based mainly on the stories of men in recovery, women have not always found it easy to identify with some of the content. Also, much of the older literature was written with language that always referred to “he” and “him” when talking about an addict. While this early literature was intended for both males and females, the authors used male pronouns to reflect the cultural custom of the

time and to make the language simple. Over time, newer materials have been written that include more women's stories and perspectives, as this one does, helping women connect more strongly with the message. Because *A Woman's Guide to Recovery* is written specifically for women, the feminine pronoun is used throughout. *A Woman's Guide to Recovery* intends to draw from and to add to the entire legacy of recovery wisdom, with its attention on women's experiences with addiction and recovery.

A great many lives have been changed through Twelve Step programs. Your life can change too. Recovery from addiction comes down to one person at a time, one day at time. This book is written for one person—the woman who's desperate for hope. It's for you if you're so far down that you have to look up to see bottom. It's for you if your life is mostly okay, but your use of alcohol or other drugs is creating trouble for you that you can't seem to get on top of. It's for you if you don't think you can ever live any differently. It's for you if you feel all alone. It's for you if you feel hopeless when it comes to chemical use. It's for you if you were in recovery and quit using for a time, but then quit doing the work of recovery and returned to active addiction, feeling like a total failure. It's for you if you're sober from chemicals but want to bring more *life* to your life. It's for you if want to have your eyes come alive with the light of recovery. It's also for you if you love a woman who is an active addict and who everyone says is hopeless, and yet, because you care so much for her, you're sure there must be a solution somewhere. It's for whoever wants to understand this thing called addiction that makes messes out of lives. If you're open enough to pick up this book and read this far, it's for you.

Addiction is messy.

Recovery is possible.

It's quite a distance between those two statements—a distance that starts with one small step. Then one small step. Then one small step. Then one small step. Then one small step.

You can begin now with just one small step.