

12

Smart Things

**to Do When the Booze
and Drugs Are Gone**



Choosing Emotional Sobriety
through Self-Awareness
and Right Action

Allen Berger, Ph.D.

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Editor's note

The names, details, and circumstances have been changed to protect the privacy of those mentioned in this publication.

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Dedication

I dedicate this book to Tom Sawdei, a kind and gentle friend with a very bright future, who valiantly struggled to see beyond his addiction and society's stigma to the endless possibilities of recovery. I miss you, Tom.

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Foreword

Emotional sobriety has not been given its due recognition in recovery. We have understandably focused all of our energy on the early stages of recovery, but unfortunately we have not sufficiently addressed the many challenges that occur after we “put the plug in the jug.” It is my opinion that one of the major causes of relapse is our failure to grow up and address our emotional dependency.

Once in a while, a writer comes along who extends and completes an earlier discovery made about recovery. This is the unique accomplishment of the work of Dr. Allen Berger in explaining the role of emotional maturity in recovery. Dr. Berger expands on Bill Wilson’s understanding of emotional sobriety. He bases his work on Bill Wilson’s concepts, outlined in his 1958 *AA Grapevine* article titled “The Next Frontier: Emotional Sobriety.”

The power of Dr. Berger’s book is in his attention to detail. Each chapter is carefully constructed with clear explanations. He provides us with a tool to make a fearless and thorough emotional inventory. He integrates concepts from many different sources in psychology, and he provides us with exceptional case studies that illustrate the working points of the text.

The tasks and instructions set forth in this book provide an excellent guide to emotional sobriety. Dr. Berger defines the problem in easily understood terms as our emotional dependency or our failure to grow up. He explains how our “idealized self” and “false self” create obstacles to our maturation. He then points out the solution as differentiation of the self, and as recovering our lost, true self. He gives us a way of moving beyond emotional dependency in our relationships to a place of autonomy and choice. In a sense, the solution for those who lack emotional sobriety sounds simple: grow up. But of course, if emotional sobriety were that simple, we would all have achieved it long ago. True emotional sobriety is a life’s journey, with twists and turns, delays and detours, and much to be learned along the way. Dr. Berger provides a wonderful, detailed road map to guide readers on the journey.

Jerry McDonald, ACATA
Producer, Drug Awareness Hour at the Betty Ford Center

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Sid Farrar, Hazelden's Editorial and Trade Director, played a crucial role in this book. Sid helped me discover that it was this book that I needed to write next. Sid, I deeply respect your professionalism, insights, honesty, and integrity.

I am also grateful to Sid for assigning Vincent Hyman to this project. Vince was a perfect fit for me. I developed a wonderful collaborative relationship with him. Vince, you were a godsend and helped me tremendously at every stage of this project. The quality and depth of this book are a direct result of your efforts. You served in so many different roles during this process: You were my muse, my critic, my friend, my colleague, and an outstanding editor. Thank you.

I also want to acknowledge the Hazelden marketing staff, especially Lisa Malani and Alison Vandenberg, for their ongoing support and their faith in my work. Our professional relationship means a lot to me.

Tom McCall, my sponsor, plays a crucial role in whatever I do personally and professionally. Tom, for over thirty-eight years, you have been my counsel, my friend, my inspiration, and a safe haven. In fact, in the first year of my recovery, you turned me on to the

Grapevine article that eventually became the inspiration for this book. Thank you, my friend. I will be forever grateful for your love, your support, your wisdom, and your guidance.

And finally I want to acknowledge Southwest Airlines and its wonderful employees. You made my travels safe, comfortable, and enjoyable. Thank you! This entire book was written on Southwest flights between Nashville and Los Angeles.

Introduction

Understanding Emotional Sobriety

This book will help you take the next step in your recovery. It is about the emotional quality of your recovery. It will help you grow up and teach you how to better cope with your emotions. It is about *emotional sobriety*.

The concept of emotional sobriety is not easy to grasp. Let's start with an example.

I want you to meet John. He has been clean and sober for ten years. In the past year, he has been struggling with bouts of anxiety. For a long time he believed he was suffering from an undiagnosed medical problem that was causing his anxiety. First, he thought he was having a heart attack because of irregular heartbeats. After he received a thorough cardiac exam, including a treadmill stress test that showed his heart to be quite healthy, he next thought it might be a brain tumor. But after his MRI was normal, he finally accepted that his anxiety was psychological in nature, not physiological. His sweaty palms, headaches, stomachaches, heart palpitations, slight tremors, and feelings of dread and impending doom were all symptoms of anxiety.

He decided to seek therapy because working the Steps wasn't

giving him enough relief. He needed professional help and so came to see me as a therapist. In the first session, I noted how John seemed to want everything to live up to his expectations. For example, he wanted to start our session by telling me about his past. I was more concerned about what was currently happening in John's life that was giving him trouble. I told him this, and it threw him off balance. It took a considerable amount of time for him to regain his balance. You see, what John expected when he came to therapy was that we were going to delve into his past.

I've learned that in the first five minutes of a therapy session, a client will show you what is wrong and what kind of help they need. John was very rigid. He had many expectations about how things were supposed to be, and when these expectations weren't met, he didn't know what to do. He became upset and lost his emotional balance. As we explored this pattern to his behavior, he began to see how his need to control everything and everyone in his life was the precursor to his anxiety attacks. Once he started to learn how to live more in the here and now, John's anxiety disappeared.

John was sober, but he didn't have *emotional sobriety*. Most of us think of *sobriety* as being free of alcohol and other drugs, and this is true. *Emotional sobriety* is not about being free of emotions—that is impossible. You will always have your emotions. Rather, it's about freeing ourselves from bondage to our emotional states. Emotional sobriety is a state in which we experience our emotions and respect them, but we respond to them the way we would respond to other kinds of information. So, we don't act out in a knee-jerk response to every passing emotional state as if it were our life's rule—or our drug. Nor do we blame our emotional responses on other people. We take full responsibility for our emotions and our choice to act—or not—on the information they feed us.

When you achieve emotional sobriety, you will be able to cope with life on life's terms. You will

- hold on to yourself in relationships, be emotionally balanced, and maintain a healthy perspective on things that are upsetting
- keep the locus of your emotional center of gravity within you and stay grounded during turbulent times
- focus on the things that you can change, and accept and let go of what you can't
- accept your imperfections, and have faith in the “process of recovery”
- know a new level of emotional freedom and peace of mind; you will look at life with a sense of wonderment
- have an illuminated gaze and vision

Very little has been written on this subject. Most of the recovery literature focuses on getting clean and sober and staying clean and sober—and for good reason. We need to put the plug in the jug, and keep it there, before we can work on other issues. Bill Wilson clearly recommended this approach. He said, first the “booze cure” and then on to “the development of much more real maturity and balance” (1958). Breaking the shackles of addiction is necessarily the first step in recovery. But once that obsession and compulsion to drink or use has been lifted, we are faced with *living* clean and sober.

More and more of us are realizing that we haven't truly matured, that our emotional development is arrested. We don't like how we react when things don't go our way. We are aware of the difficulty we have in comforting ourselves and staying balanced when we are disappointed or hurt. We secretly know that we need to grow up emotionally—that there is something wrong with how we react

when circumstances or people don't meet our expectations. And because we have developed some degree of insight over the years, we know that our problem is of our own making. But what can we do about it?

Some of us may have trouble accepting this fact. It's hard to admit that we are still immature, especially now that we are clean and sober. But if we are honest with ourselves, it shouldn't be too difficult to see that we are immature. If you have any doubt, just ask a few people who are close to you. Give them permission to give you honest feedback about your reaction when you don't get your way. You might be surprised at what they tell you.

We all have trouble dealing with life on life's terms. I still struggle with this issue, and this past summer I celebrated thirty-eight years of being clean and sober. This is a common problem for all of us who are trying to live clean and sober. That's why this topic is so popular in meetings.

So here's our dilemma: The quality of our recovery is determined by how we respond to the problems or challenges in our lives. But because we don't know how best to respond to these issues, we end up stuck and frustrated. This is at the core of our problem. Over and over again, we expect life to live up to our expectations or specifications. When it doesn't, we try to force the square peg into the round hole. We demand the impossible from ourselves, others, and life itself. And then we get frustrated or angry when things don't go our way. Sometimes we end up feeling depressed or anxious, as well. Many times, these reactions lead to a relapse or a dry drunk.

How do we overcome our emotional handicap—our immaturity—and develop real emotional sobriety? How do we learn how to respond, in a healthier way, to what life expects from us? How do we learn to respond with grace and humility when things don't go our way? Well, that is exactly what this book is about. My goal is to

help you become aware of what you are doing that is keeping you immature, and to help you grow up. I want you to become aware of what is interfering with your emotional growth and preventing you from achieving emotional sobriety.

Before we get on our way, I want to introduce you to the psychological concept of differentiation, because it will be quite helpful in understanding emotional sobriety.

Emotional Differentiation

Dr. Murray Bowen, a psychiatrist from Georgetown University, borrowed this concept from developmental cellular biology. I'm not a biologist, so I will present a layman's understanding of this idea.

Cells go through various stages of growth, from less specialized to more specialized. At a very early stage, the cell has the capacity to become many different tissues—an eye cell, or a liver cell, or a muscle cell. At this stage, we call the cell *undifferentiated*. As the cell matures, certain genes get turned “on,” or expressed, and others get turned “off,” or silenced. As this happens, the cell matures into its destiny as an eye cell or a liver cell or a muscle cell. Here's the really amazing thing: Before a cell has become differentiated, we can move it to another part of the body, and it will assume that part's function. For example, if we relocate an undifferentiated cell whose DNA is programmed to become an eye to the cheek of a fetus, it will become a part of the cheek—it will mature as a cheek cell! The microenvironment surrounding the undifferentiated cell will influence what genes are expressed or silenced in the undifferentiated cell. It will be influenced by the genetic coding of these specialized cells surrounding it, and its basic nature will change accordingly. But if that same cell were *differentiated*, meaning that its genes had expressed themselves, and we relocated it to the cheek, a third eye would grow on the cheek of the fetus. This differentiated cell will not

be changed or influenced by the surrounding cells. I guess we can say that this cell has reached maturity.

Dr. Bowen believed that people develop similarly. We begin life *undifferentiated*. If we are encouraged to develop according to our *real-self*, we differentiate. If we continue to unfold in this manner, we will evolve into the person we were meant to be. We will mature accordingly. Our development will be like that of an acorn that grows into a beautiful and deeply unique oak tree. Psychologically, differentiation results in a solid sense of self. The greater our differentiation, the less we will be overly influenced by circumstances or significant others. This doesn't mean that we won't allow ourselves to be influenced. Rather, it means that we have the ability to choose to be influenced, without feeling like we are losing ourselves or that we are being controlled.

If we don't develop along these lines, we will have poor differentiation and a very fragile sense of self. We will feel overly anxious about being loved and accepted. We will become an object in our lives, rather than the subject. As a result, we will be overly concerned with what we have and how others respond to us, rather than focusing on who we are. Our value will therefore be determined by our marketability, and therefore our self-esteem will depend on what we have, our circumstances, and how we are accepted or treated.

The fear that we won't be loved or accepted creates a state of continuous anxiety. We cannot live in this highly anxious state; therefore we must resolve our dilemma. In order to be less anxious, we develop a *false-self*. This false-self is constructed out of our perception of a perfect or idealized-self. The idealized-self is who we think we *should* be, who we have to be, to always be loved and accepted. It is the answer to our search for personal glory and ultimate value.

The idealized-self is different for each of us, because each of us weighs different personal characteristics as important. Some of us

will be more concerned with pleasing others, others more concerned with being independent or with having power. The list can go on and on. The point is that our false-self is idiosyncratic; it is unique to our set of personal values.

The more alienated we are from our true-self, the more we identify with who we think we should be. Our lives become tyrannized by “shoulds” and “ought-tos.” We are driven to adhere to these rules, regardless of their effect on our lives. Since the fear of being rejected drives this whole operation, the locus of our center of emotional gravity is external. We look toward circumstances or people to make us feel okay.

People who are differentiated, on the other hand, are more self-validated. They hold on to individuality in relationships and do not try to control others, or submit to the control of others, or rebel against or withdraw from others, when pressured. Differentiated people hold on to their sense of self when there is relationship conflict, when they are pressured to submit, or when circumstances don't go as expected. They stay connected to and maintain their sense of self. Or as renowned psychoanalyst Erich Fromm stated, they experience “union with the preservation of integrity” (1956). (As you will see, *union with the preservation of integrity* is a persistent theme when seeking emotional sobriety.)

If we are undifferentiated, we become emotionally fused with others or circumstances, and therefore we are strongly influenced by these things. We respond to emotional fusion in one of three ways: (1) by trying to control people, places, or things, (2) by submitting to the will of others or to the nature of circumstances, or (3) by emotionally withdrawing.

Dr. Bowen believed that differentiation of self existed on a continuum from undifferentiated to differentiated. He saw this continuum as ranging from 0 to 100. Low scores represented

undifferentiation, while high scores indicated higher degrees of differentiation. It is important to realize that we pick a partner who is at a similar level of emotional differentiation. If our differentiation is at 70, we will pick someone who is between 65 and 75. Couples or partners who are severely undifferentiated become emotional conjoined twins. They are highly reactive to everything their partner does or says and vice versa.

This also explains why we have more difficulty in a relationship when someone's importance to us increases. If our ability to hold on to our true-self does not keep pace with our partner's increasing level of importance, we will run into trouble. As you will see, we save our worst behavior for those who are most important to us.

Most of us lose ourselves in our lives and in our relationships because of our lack of emotional differentiation. The bottom line is that the more undifferentiated we are, the more difficult it will be to achieve emotional sobriety. In other words, emotional sobriety requires us to have a sense of ourselves and to hold on to ourselves.

To better define emotional sobriety, I want to unpack a letter that Bill Wilson wrote to help a depressed friend. In fact, this was the first piece of literature that mentioned the concept of emotional sobriety. As we review the issues Bill identified in this letter, I will discuss how his insights relate to other ideas in psychology about the development of emotional maturity. Hopefully this will help you understand emotional sobriety.

Bill's Letter on Emotional Sobriety

I think that many oldsters who have put our “booze cure” to severe but successful tests still find that they often lack emotional sobriety. Perhaps they will be the spearhead for the next major development in AA—the development

of much more real maturity and balance (which is to say, humility) in our relations with ourselves, with our fellows, and with God.

Those adolescent urges that so many of us have for top approval, perfect security, and perfect romance—urges quite appropriate to age seventeen—prove to be an impossible way of life when we are at age forty-seven or fifty-seven.

Since AA began, I've taken immense wallops in all these areas because of my failure to grow up, emotionally and spiritually. My God, how painful it is to keep demanding the impossible, and how very painful to discover finally, that all along we have had the cart before the horse! Then comes the final agony of seeing how awfully wrong we have been, but still finding ourselves unable to get off the emotional merry-go-round.

How to translate a right mental conviction into a right emotional result, and so into easy, happy and good living—well, that's not only the neurotic's problem, it's the problem of life itself for all of us who have got to the point of real willingness to hew to right principles in all our affairs.

Even then, as we hew away, peace and joy may still elude us. That's the place that so many of us AA oldsters have come to. And it's a hell of a spot, literally. How shall our unconscious—from which so many of our fears, compulsions and phony aspirations still stream—be brought into line with what we actually believe, know and want! How to convince our dumb, raging and hidden “Mr. Hyde” becomes our main task.

I've recently come to believe that this can be achieved. I believe so because I begin to see many benighted ones—

folks like you and me—commencing to get results. Last autumn depression, having no real rational cause at all, almost took me to the cleaners. I began to be scared that I was in for another long chronic spell. Considering the grief I've had with depressions, this wasn't a bright prospect.

I kept asking myself, "Why can't the Twelve Steps help to release depression?" By the hour I stared at the St. Francis prayer . . . "It's better to comfort than to be comforted." Here was the formula, all right. But why didn't it work?

Suddenly I realized what the matter was. My basic flaw had always been dependence—almost absolute dependence—on people or circumstances to supply me with prestige, security, and the like. Failing to get these things according to my perfectionist dreams and specifications, I had fought for them. And when defeat came, so did my depression.

There wasn't a chance of making the outgoing love of St. Francis a workable and joyous way of life until these fatal and almost absolute dependencies were cut away.

Because I had over the years undergone a little spiritual development, the *absolute* quality of these frightful dependencies had never before been so starkly revealed. Reinforced by what Grace I could secure in prayer, I found I had to exert every ounce of will and action to cut off these faulty emotional dependencies upon people, upon AA, indeed, upon any set of circumstances whatever.

Then only could I be free to love as Francis had. Emotional and instinctual satisfactions, I saw, were really the extra dividends of having love, offering love, and expressing a love appropriate to each relation of life.

Plainly I could not avail myself to God's love until

I was able to offer it back to Him by loving others as He would have me. And I couldn't possibly do that if I was victimized by false dependencies.

For my dependency meant demand—a demand for the possession and control of the people and conditions surrounding me.

While those words “absolute dependency” may look like a gimmick, they were the ones that helped to trigger my release into my present degree of stability and quietness of mind, qualities which I am now trying to consolidate by offering love to others regardless of the return to me.

This seems to be the primary healing circuit: an outgoing love of God's creation and His people, by means of which we avail ourselves of His love for us. It is most clear that the real current can't flow until our paralyzing dependencies are broken, and broken at depth. Only then can we possibly have a glimmer of what adult love really is.

Spiritual calculus you say? Not a bit of it. Watch any AA of six months working with a new Twelfth Step case. If the case says, “To the devil with you,” the Twelfth Stepper only smiles and turns to another case. He doesn't feel frustrated or rejected. If his next case responds, and in turn starts to give love and attention to another alcoholic, yet gives none back to him, the sponsor is happy about it anyway. He still doesn't feel rejected; instead he rejoices that his one-time prospect is sober and happy. And if his next following case turns out in later time to be his best friend (or romance) then the sponsor is most joyful. But he well knows that his happiness is a by-product—the extra dividend of giving without any demand for return.

The real stabilizing thing for him was having and

offering love to that strange drunk on his doorstep. That was Francis at work, powerful and practical, minus dependency and minus demand.

In the first six months of my own sobriety, I worked with many alcoholics. Not a one responded. Yet this work kept me sober. It wasn't a question of those alcoholics giving me anything. My stability came out of trying to give, not out of demanding that I receive.

Thus I think it can work out with emotional sobriety. If we examine every disturbance we have, great or small, we will find at the root of it some unhealthy dependency and its consequent unhealthy demand. Let us, with God's help, continually surrender these hobbling demands. Then we can be set free to live and love; we may then be able to Twelfth Step ourselves and others into emotional sobriety.

Of course I haven't offered you a really new idea—only a gimmick that has started to unhook several of my own “hexes” at depth. Nowadays my brain no longer races compulsively in either elation, grandiosity or depression. I have been given a quiet place in bright sunshine. (1958)*

Unpacking Bill's Letter

What an incredible document! I believe this letter is one of Bill's most important contributions.

Bill makes an important point about emotional sobriety in the opening comments of his letter. He notes that even though we may have stopped drinking or using, many of us have not achieved emotional sobriety. Emotional sobriety doesn't spontaneously appear.

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We have to work hard at growing up. Bill did. In addition to the time he spent working the Steps, getting spiritual direction from the Reverend Sam Shoemaker, spending time alone in contemplation, and working with others, he also sought out psychotherapy. His therapist was the famous Dr. Harry Tiebout, the first psychiatrist to recognize the importance of the fellowship of Alcoholics Anonymous. Bill gained many valuable insights into himself and his feelings as a result of these efforts.

Bill defined emotional sobriety as a “real maturity” and “balance” in our relationship with ourselves, our fellows, and our Higher Power. We cannot have balance if we make what other people think more important than what we think. We cannot have balance or hold on to ourselves if we don’t grow up, emotionally. Therefore, it is best to think about emotional sobriety as a by-product of a particular way of being in life.

Bill was an incredibly honest and humble man. He admits that he had major problems in his life because of his “failure to grow up, emotionally and spiritually.” Isn’t this impressive—the cofounder of AA admitting he was immature? His level of humility and honesty is truly inspiring.

Since maturity is critical for total recovery, our immaturity needs to be addressed in recovery. In several of his writings, Dr. Harry Tiebout identified the cause of emotional immaturity as “infantile aspects of the child’s ego that persist into adulthood” (1999). It was Dr. Tiebout who first used the term “king baby” to describe one aspect of our behavior. He observed that we wanted everyone to submit to our will and desires. Yes, you read this correctly; he called us big babies. Recall what I said earlier, that the meaning of life does not come from life living up to our expectations, but rather *how we deal with life’s expectations of us*. This attitude is quite impossible to adopt when we are big babies who demand that

everyone submit to our will and that we get everything we want, right now.

The foundation for recovery is humility. The Twelve Steps are designed to create and maintain a sense of humility in our lives. We must learn to let go of our selfishness and self-centeredness. We must learn to get out of our own way—or rather, out of the way of our real-self. Therefore humility is also important in achieving emotional sobriety. Humility will ultimately be the foundation upon which we develop the ability to hold on to ourselves; to prevent ourselves from being knocked off balance by people, places, or things; and to not be overly influenced by others. It also puts our needs and desires into proper perspective. Can you begin to see how relevant emotional differentiation is to this entire discussion? In fact, I believe that differentiation is to emotional sobriety as water is to life. Differentiation quenches the thirst of emotional sobriety.

One of the hallmarks of emotional sobriety is honest and humble self-esteem. By self-esteem, I am not talking about the arrogant display of “esteem” for oneself or a pompous assumption of privilege and superiority. *True* self-esteem occurs when we respect our own needs and our desires *as we do those of others*, neither overvaluing nor devaluing them. Until we achieve emotional sobriety, we will either feel less than or better than others. Without emotional sobriety, we will never experience the value of true humility and how it can improve our relationship with ourselves and with others. The first step toward emotional sobriety is to see the effect of our unreasonable expectations.

Bill saw that unreasonable expectations—what he called his “adolescent urges” for “top approval, perfect security, and perfect romance”—created an impossible way of life for him, just as they do for us too. In other words, he realized (1) that he looked outside of himself for validation, wanting “top approval,” and (2) that his expectations

were both perfectionistic and absolute, wanting “perfect security and perfect romance.” These are undeniably twisted expectations.

Looking outside of ourselves for validation is what marital therapist and author Dr. David Schnarch referred to as “other validated self-esteem” (1997). This kind of self-esteem is dependent upon how others react or respond to us. Because this kind of self-esteem is dependent on things that are beyond our control, it is very fragile. When one thing doesn’t go our way, or a person doesn’t act as we expect them to, down the toilet we go.

Other-validated self-esteem makes us highly reactive. It lowers the threshold of our reactions, because everything that happens to us has implications for our self-esteem. But most of us don’t see it this way. We don’t want to admit that we are still so self-centered and that we take most things personally. We’d rather think of ourselves as overly sensitive, but the real problem is our self-centeredness and our other-validated self-esteem.

Bill also described how he wanted “perfect security and perfect romance.” We are perfectionists. We have very strong and rigid ideas about how life is supposed to be, which is one of the reasons we drank, used other drugs, or did both. We didn’t know how to deal with life as it was; we wanted it our way.

Bill also recognized that the emotional issues that were causing him to be depressed were deep within and, for a long time, outside of his consciousness. Bill was very insightful. Sigmund Freud said, “We are being lived by forces within us.” What a meaningful observation. This implies that there are forces within us—forces that we are unaware of—that have a very powerful influence on our feelings and behavior. These hidden forces create a huge blind spot.

Bill knew that what lay in his unconscious had to be addressed before he could fully integrate a “right mental conviction” or “right principles” into his life. He knew he had to deal with his “raging and

hidden Mr. Hyde.” We all have our own Mr. Hyde that we need to come to grips with if we want to achieve emotional sobriety. (More about this in a moment.)

Bill mentioned that his “fears, compulsions and phony aspirations” need to be brought into line with what we know and believe. How do we address these in recovery? The first step is to be honest with ourselves. Our greatest phony aspiration comes from our “perfectionist dreams and specifications.” We are perfectionists, whether we care to admit it or not, and we project these feelings onto circumstances and other people. This doesn’t mean that we do everything perfectly, because that’s impossible. Rather, it means we expect ourselves and others to live up to our perfectionistic specifications. We are absolute, black and white, in our concept of who we think we should be and how life should be. This is a major problem and feeds our emotional dependency. Remember my discussion of the false-self and how we developed it to resolve our anxiety? Well, the solution we adopted became an absolute: This is how *we* must be and how *things* must be. There is no alternative. There is no gray; life is black and white.

There’s good news though. Yes, we built a false-self to escape the anxiety of undifferentiation. This false-self seems a prison made of perfectionistic “shoulds.” Yet we aren’t necessarily left to be imprisoned by our “shoulds” for the remainder of our lives. Emotional freedom is possible. We constructed the false-self, and we can deconstruct it.

Bill tells us there is hope. With much effort, we can grow up. We begin by identifying the problem. Bill identified the culprit behind his unrealistic expectations and depression. His hidden and raging Mr. Hyde was his “almost absolute dependence—on people or circumstances to supply me with prestige, security and the like.” His basic problem was “absolute dependence.” He was emotionally dependent on people and circumstances and therefore emotionally undifferentiated.

When we are emotionally dependent, how we feel about ourselves is contingent on circumstances and how we are treated by others. The more important a circumstance is to us, the more power it has over our feelings. The more important a person is to us, the more power they have over our feelings. So when we say, “This is making me angry!” or “You are making me angry!” it means we are emotionally dependent. When we are emotionally fused, people or circumstances actually make us feel this way or that. The more emotionally dependent we are, the more influenced we are by circumstances or how others behave or feel.

There’s an important concept that I want to introduce at this point. It has to do with how we interact with our environment to get our needs met. Dr. Fritz Perls, a brilliant Gestalt therapist, discussed the difference between “environmental support” and “self support” (1973). When we are emotionally dependent, we rely on environmental support to feel good about ourselves and to meet our needs. When we ask someone how we look, we are manipulating that person for emotional support. We want them to tell us we look good because our self-esteem is dependent upon their impression.

Dr. Perls was highly critical of this behavior: “We are phobic, we avoid suffering, especially the suffering of frustrations. We are spoiled, and we don’t want to go through the hell gates of suffering: We stay immature, we go on manipulating the world, rather than to suffer the pains of growing up. This is the story” (1973). Perls is saying that the more mature we are, the more we suffer our frustrations and use that tension to become self-supportive. This means that I stop requiring you to do what I want you to do, in order for me to be okay. I also stop manipulating situations to meet my needs. I stand on my own two feet and support my own feelings or desires. I ask for what I want, rather than manipulate you to say what I want to hear or to do what I want you to do. If you don’t want to give me what I

want, I grieve or, better yet, appreciate what you do have to offer. But I don't insist upon getting my way.

Dr. Nathaniel Branden, an expert on self-esteem, said, "Self-esteem is the reputation we have with ourselves" (1994). You cannot have true self-esteem unless you stop manipulating others to make you feel okay. You cannot have emotional sobriety until you deal with your emotional dependency.

Bill realized that there was a connection between his emotional dependency and his depression. For Bill, depression always followed not being able to get others to submit to his will (environmental support). He realized that he became depressed when he failed to get people or circumstances to meet his perfectionistic dreams and specifications. When life didn't meet his expectations, he got depressed. He took it personally.

This is another characteristic of emotional dependency, which we call *emotional fusion*. Bill was emotionally fused with people and circumstances: His sense of himself was determined by what he saw reflected in how life conformed to his expectations. If things went his way, he was fine; if they didn't, he became angry and then depressed. In order to grow up, Bill came to the conclusion that he needed to use "every ounce of will and action to cut off these faulty emotional dependencies upon people, upon AA, indeed, upon any set of circumstances whatever."

Yes, you read the last paragraph correctly. Bill said that he had to end all his dependencies, even his dependency upon AA. Quite a remarkable statement coming from the cofounder of the AA program. This underscores a very important point: A Twelve Step program does not replace our dependency on drugs with a dependency on the program. Rather it helps us become free of all dependencies: first our dependency on alcohol or other drugs, and then our dependency

“upon people, upon AA, indeed upon any set of circumstances whatever.” *This is the true essence of emotional sobriety.*

Please note that Bill mentioned that he had to “exert every ounce of will and action to cut off these faulty emotional dependencies.” This point is often misunderstood in recovery. Willpower has a very bad reputation in recovery. Our defiant reliance upon willpower locked us into a vicious cycle with our addiction. While willpower interferes with surrendering to the First Step, it becomes essential to recovery beyond the First Step because without your willingness, nothing will change. Bill stepped up to take action against his dependencies. He made his desire to change intentional. Taking right action and total responsibility for one’s feelings and actions is characteristic of people with high self-esteem. Self-esteem and emotional sobriety walk hand in hand.

Bill also mentioned the lesson he learned in working with others. Early on in his recovery, he worked with several people who did not get sober. Here we are introduced to a very important principle of emotional sobriety: *intrinsic motivation*. Emotional sobriety is based on doing the right thing for the sake of our own integrity. If this is our true motivation, then we do not require the other person to respond in a particular manner. There is no expectation attached to our behavior. They are free to respond as they wish. I am I, and you are you. Bill’s work with people who did not get sober might be considered work done out of intrinsic motivation. The work was done because it was the right thing to do, not because it would bring fame. It was done regardless of whether the person would sober up or not. Bill was Bill, and the other was the other.

Emotional dependency interfered with Bill’s ability to love and to be loved. It created what Erich Fromm called an “immature love” (1956). The essence of this kind of love is, “I love you because I need

you.” When we are emotionally dependent, we become like emotional conjoined twins. We lose our individuality, our sense of self, in our connection with our partner.

It is easy to see how this kind of love becomes driven by demands. People, and the conditions surrounding us, must submit to our will and desires, or else. We demand complete and blind obedience. And if challenged, we employ whatever tactics necessary to manipulate the challenger into submitting to our will.

We need to grow up and get over our emotional dependency before we can understand what Bill called “adult love.” Erich Fromm called it “mature love” (1956). As noted earlier, mature love is based on a “union with the preservation of integrity.” When we stand on our own two feet, we can join, without losing our individuality. Love becomes based on personal choice and desire, rather than dependency. Adult love says, “I want you because I love you.”

Bill gives us the key that can unlock much wisdom and maturity in our lives. He points out that whenever we are disturbed, regardless of the magnitude of the issue, our reaction occurs because we have “some unhealthy dependency and its consequent unhealthy demand.” Really take a moment and let this sink in. It will blow your mind to realize that whenever you are upset, it means that your raging and hidden Mr. Hyde is the culprit.

The Path to Emotional Sobriety

Emotional sobriety sounds great, doesn't it? It's like warm apple pie with homemade vanilla ice cream—who wouldn't want it? But how do we achieve this state of being? How do we unhook our emotional dependency and learn to stand on our own two feet?

Well, that is what the remainder of this book is all about. I have selected twelve smart things you can do to grow up and unhook your emotional dependency. I refer to them as “smart things” because these

are things done by people who have a high degree of emotional intelligence, self-esteem, and emotional resilience. Here are the twelve smart things:

1. Know yourself—and how to stay centered.
2. Stop allowing others to edit your reality.
3. Stop taking things personally.
4. Own your projections as an act of integrity.
5. Confront yourself for the sake of your integrity.
6. Stop pressuring others to change, and instead pressure yourself to change.
7. Develop a healthy perspective toward yourself, your feelings, and your emotional themes.
8. Appreciate what is.
9. Comfort yourself when you are hurt or disappointed.
10. Use your personal compass to guide your life.
11. Embrace relationship tensions as the fuel for personal growth.
12. The “problem” is not the real problem.

After reading this list, I immediately thought of the line from the Big Book, “What an order, I can’t go through with it!” Please don’t expect yourself to master each and every one of these suggestions. As long as you are willing to experiment with these, you will take a big step in your emotional development. Some will be more relevant for you than others. You pick and choose the best to focus on.

My hope is that by the time you finish reading this book, you will have learned how to maintain your emotional balance within yourself and in relation to others.



Those of us who have been trudging the road of recovery understand the importance of inward searching. At some point, we realized that if we were going to stay clean and sober, we had to stop blaming others for what was wrong with our lives, let go of our self-righteousness, stop our futile self-justifications, and make amends to those we hurt. Finally, we dared to become honest with ourselves and faced the painful truth that our problems were of our own making. Bill Wilson put it this way, “We must awake or we die” (1957).

If we have been rigorous in our efforts, we have made a “pains-taking and vigorous effort” to uncover and discover our emotional liabilities. While this task is straightforward and simple, it is not easy. Our false-self cries out against these efforts. We are thwarted by our blind spots and delusions at every turn. Do not be disheartened, this kind of resistance is expected. It took us many years to construct our false-self, and dismantling it will take persistent effort. Hang in there!

An interesting phenomenon occurs for some of us in the first ten years of recovery. We started the journey of recovery with a sense

of urgency. We were told that we needed to accept the nature of our fatal malady and give up on the idea that we could control our drinking or using. We learned as much as we could about our illness and set out on the difficult course of taking a personal inventory and cleaning house. We desperately wanted to be clean and sober and to find true peace of mind. In the early years of recovery, our self-discovery revolved around understanding our emotional deformities and how they related to our disease. We wanted relief from our mental obsession with alcohol or other drugs, and absolution for the wreckage of our past. But once our compulsion to drink or use was lifted and we started enjoying some degree of peace of mind, many of us slacked off on our efforts. We gradually decreased our meeting attendance—maybe going just enough to keep ourselves sober, but not enough to stay in touch with real recovery. We became complacent. Our efforts, at working the Steps or in working with others, became more sporadic. We mistakenly treated recovery like it was an event, rather than a process.

Many of us felt our obsession and compulsion to drink or use lift, but we were still not enjoying the full emotional benefits of recovery. Some of us were even accused of being on a “dry drunk.” Oftentimes, those who are closest to us sensed something was wrong before we became aware of it.

Then trouble really hit. We began to experience feelings we didn't know how to handle. We either ended up compromising our integrity in some way, or we developed a severe depression or a crippling anxiety. We ended up in crisis. A crisis of personal limitation. A crisis that was created because we stopped growing in our recovery. We stopped working on our recovery. We forgot that recovery is like walking up an escalator that is going down. When we quit climbing, we regressed.

Do not be alarmed if this has happened or is happening to you.

The crisis you are facing doesn't mean that something is wrong with you. Quite the contrary. It means that something deep within is right. Within us is an evolutionary urge to grow, to strive toward wholeness or self-actualization. When we ignore this basic need, we become spiritually sick. Because this basic need won't be denied, we unconsciously create a crisis to provide ourselves with the opportunity to grow up, to take the next step in our emotional and spiritual development, to wake up.

If you have come to this crossroad in your recovery, you have to make a choice. You can either continue on your dry drunk—which may ultimately lead to full-blown relapse—or start climbing up that escalator again. You can either keep doing what you have been doing or renew your effort at self-discovery and take your recovery up to a whole new level, just as Bill Wilson did. The choice is yours, but if you choose to ignore what is going on, I hope you will at least be honest with yourself about the choice you are making to ignore an opportunity for growth and to develop real emotional sobriety.

Of course, you don't have to manufacture a crisis to focus on the emotional quality of your recovery—just like people no longer need to hit bottom to begin recovery. You can raise your consciousness and take on this challenge by accepting the importance of this emotional aspect of your recovery.

If you choose to step up and seek emotional sobriety, then it is important to take an *emotional inventory*. The purpose of making a searching and fearless emotional inventory is quite familiar to those of us who have worked the Twelve Steps. It is to “find exactly how, when, and where our natural desires have warped us” (AA 1981, 43). This means we need to reach beyond those things that are superficially wrong with us, like our anger, our fear of rejection, our indecisiveness, our ambivalence, or our jealousy. These emotions are symptoms—they are the smoke, not the fire, of our lack of emotional

sobriety. We need to identify the patterns in our life and their emotional theme in order to damp the fire that generates the smoke.

Bill Wilson demonstrated the importance of taking an emotional inventory. The content of his letter in the introduction was based on what he discovered when he searched deep within himself to understand the underlying cause of his depression. He identified the nature of the emotional pattern connected with his depression. Bill realized that his unreasonable expectations for people and circumstances to meet his “perfectionist specifications and dreams” were created by an “almost absolute dependence on people and circumstances.” I believe that if we are honest with ourselves, we will identify with Bill. We will see this pattern in our lives too.

There’s a paradox that operates here. We cannot change by trying to be what we are not, by trying to appear more together and mature than we actually are. The heart of emotional sobriety comes from grappling with the difference between our false-self—the one we have constructed to make ourselves more loved—and our true-self.

Let’s revisit the concept of false-self and true-self, discussed first in the introduction. Have you ever seen a beautiful bonsai tree? A bonsai artist works patiently over many years to constrain what should be a full-sized tree into perfect miniature. The artist constantly prunes the tree, wraps wires around its branches to shape them, deprives it of water, and trims its roots to fit a tiny pot. Such a tree becomes perfect to look at. And yet . . . and yet. It is not its true-self. It is a tree made to conform to a *vision* of miniature perfection.

Every one of us was anxious or hurt in some form—whether real or perceived—as a child, and we developed an image of how we *should* be in order for the world to love us—a set of rules that, if followed, would make us “perfect.” If we are honest, we will see that our rules have made bonsai of us—bonsai of the soul. We are so afraid that our true-self is unlovable that we coil our soul with wire, drink just

enough water to stay alive but never enough to quench, and trim our roots. Like the bonsai artist, we spend years warping our true-self into a false-self. A few of us are masters at this and we seem, to others, to be perfect. But the reality is that we have constrained our true-self in an attempt to be loved. This is the impact of our perfectionist specifications—to warp our true selves to fit the rules we think will make us lovable. The bonsai'd soul is the false-self.

No human can live in such self-made bondage without breaking out now and then. And when we do, we act out in frightening ways—often in ways that betray the perfect false-self we've worked so hard to create.

In emotional recovery, we learn to remove the coils, to drink enough water, to plant our souls in earth that is rich and large enough to nurture us and mature us. And we learn to accept that some of our branches will be beautiful, and some will be scarred, and some will be laughable. We learn that as we learn to accept our true-self. This is the process of self-differentiation.

Bill's honest, inward searching helped him mature. It helped him shed his unrealistic expectations of others (and of himself)—it helped him shed the coils he'd wrapped around his world. His search helped him discover the true-self within. And this is the truth Bill uncovered: *Change begins when we admit and face who we are.* Bill admitted that he hadn't grown up and that he was emotionally dependent. Honesty set him free, but only because he had the courage to live it. Honesty will set you free too.

Guidelines for an Emotional Inventory

Bill provided us with a powerful format for identifying the emotional pattern in our lives. He stated, "If we examine every disturbance we have, great or small, we will find at the root of it some unhealthy dependency and its consequent unhealthy demand."

If you are ready to take an emotional inventory, then follow these simple instructions. For the next couple of days, keep a log of everything that bothers you. I have designed a form for this purpose. There is a user-friendly version on page 173. Make copies before you begin the emotional inventory.

The Emotional Sobriety Inventory Form

Upsetting event	Unhealthy dependency	Unreasonable expectation, claim, or demand	Your reaction, or how you responded to the situation	In order to stay centered, I need to realize that _____.

As you can see, the first column of the Emotional Sobriety Inventory Form is where you will record any event or thing that bothered you, disturbed you, or upset you. The magnitude of how upset you felt is irrelevant. Describe the event regardless of whether you were upset a lot or a little. For example, if you were driving to the grocery store and someone cut you off and you got mad, describe this event in the first column. If you came home from work and your partner failed to greet you with a kiss or a hello, and you felt upset, write it down. If you were at an AA meeting and you raised your hand to share, but you weren't selected by the leader and you got upset, describe what happened in the first column. If you did a great job on an assignment at work and you weren't recognized for your efforts and you felt hurt, write this down. If your child embarrassed you during a play date because she wouldn't share one of her

toys with the other child, write it down. Anything and everything, big or little, that bothers you over the next couple of days is to be logged in the first column. When you have recorded these events for at least two days, you have completed the first part of the emotional inventory.

The next step is to put aside a block of time, at least an hour, and pull out the emotional inventory form again. You are going to focus on completing the second column. As you can see, the second column asks you to identify the *unhealthy dependency* that was underlying your emotional reaction. For example, if you were cut off on your way to the grocery store, the unhealthy dependency might be, “My welfare and safety depends on how other people drive.” If you weren’t recognized by your supervisor for your great work, then the unhealthy dependency might be something like, “I depend on my supervisor to make me feel good about my efforts and accomplishments at work.” If your child embarrassed you during a play date, your unhealthy dependency might be, “My self-esteem depends on how my child behaves.”

This work might be difficult because you aren’t going to like seeing how emotionally dependent you are on people or circumstances. If you get stuck, ask for help from a close friend, your spouse, your sponsor, or your therapist. If you need to motivate yourself, then remind yourself that in order to grow up, you need to face your dependencies.

When you have completed the second column, you are ready to move on to the next column. In this column, you will identify the unreasonable expectation, claim, or demand created by your emotional dependency. For example, if you are focusing on your reaction when you were cut off, the unreasonable expectation might be “I expect people to pay attention to me when they are driving.” If you weren’t recognized at work for your effort, then your demand

might be something like, “I demand that my supervisor always recognize me and my efforts.” If your child embarrassed you during a play date, your unreasonable expectation might be, “I expect my child to always behave the way I want her to.”

(Do this emotional inventory enough, and you may even develop a sense of humor about it, laughing at yourself while you are writing down your demands and expectations. It’s truly comical how absurd, unreasonable, and self-centered we can be.)

In column four, you will describe how you reacted to the situation. Your reaction will fall into one of three categories:

1. *Moving against* people or trying to control them
2. *Moving toward* people by submitting to their will or trying to please them
3. *Moving away* from people by withdrawing or emotionally stonewalling them

We are all capable of doing any one of these three things, but typically we have a dominant reaction. Bill Wilson moved against people. This was how he dealt with his emotional dependency. He tried to control people and circumstances to get them to meet his specifications.

Let’s say you were disappointed that your spouse did not greet you when you came home. You felt hurt and then you went up to your bedroom and closed the door. Your reaction would be described as *moving away* or *emotionally withdrawing*. If you verbally attacked your partner, saying what a lousy and selfish person they were, then your reaction would be classified as *moving against* people. If you swallowed your hurt and made an excuse for them, like they must have had a bad day, then your reaction is *moving toward* people.

If you are rigorously honest with yourself during this process, you will be able to see the degree to which your emotional depen-

dependency is affecting your life. You will also see how you typically cope with your emotional dependency by either moving against people, moving toward people, or moving away from people.

If you are honest with yourself, you will also see the nature of your “perfectionist specifications.” I call these our *rules*. We all have a set of rules about how we are supposed to behave or feel, how others are supposed to act, and how life is supposed to be. Just as coils of wire constrict and shape the growth of the bonsai tree, our rules are coils we wrap around our emotions, our relationships, and our expectations of life. Because of our emotional dependency, we demand life to conform to our rules and expectations. This sets us up for many disappointments, conflicts, and problems.

If the bonsai artist removes the coils from the branches of the miniature tree, stops constricting its roots, and transplants it to a better place, the tree will begin to grow. It will spread its roots, its branches will reach out, and it will grow into its natural form. Until we remove our rules—our emotional dependency on others and circumstances—we will not be able to stand on our own two feet and grow up.

Bill wrote in his letter, “How shall our unconscious—from which so many of our fears, compulsions and phony aspirations still stream—be brought into line with what we actually believe, know and want! How to convince our dumb, raging and hidden ‘Mr. Hyde’ becomes our main task.” Sometimes the constraints of our rules overcome us, and we act in crazy ways. When the absurdity or damage of our perfectionistic rules is obvious even to us (other people will have seen it long ago), we come face-to-face with our own Mr. Hyde. But there is a fearful wrenching that comes from letting him go. We fear that we will be left with nothing, because for many years we have identified ourselves with our false-self, the self that spawned our Mr. Hyde. Dr. James Bugental, a brilliant psychotherapist, noted that the nakedness that comes from letting go of

these old patterns “seems so, and is so, terribly vulnerable and truly mortal” (1978). But it is only through relinquishing our dependencies and our false-self that we can set forth naked and direct into a healthier relationship with ourselves and others, and so into emotional sobriety.

We cannot have a breakout experience without releasing ourselves from Mr. Hyde’s control. Remember the wisdom of the Big Book: “Some of us have tried to hold on to our old ideas and the result was nil until we let go absolutely” (AA 2001, 58). This idea was critical early in our recovery, but is highly relevant to this stage of our recovery as well.

This chapter has been about getting to know yourself as you truly are—warts and all. Now that we have seen how ridiculous and unreasonable we can be, what can we do about it? The answer lies in learning how to hold on to ourselves, in learning how to be self-supportive and to keep our emotional center of gravity within. The solution begins with gaining a new perspective about ourselves and our expectations.

Gaining new perspective is what the fifth column in the inventory table is about—it is where we discover what we need to do to stay centered. But I don’t want you to worry about that just yet. You will return to this task later, once you have read the rest of this book. By then you will have a better idea of how to hold on to yourself and unhook your emotional dependency.

In the next chapter, you will learn that unhooking your emotional dependency begins by not letting other people edit your reality.



In the previous chapter, you conducted an emotional inventory and identified the ways that emotional dependency is affecting your life. Did you list any situations where you were feeling one way about something, and then someone else influenced your feelings about the event? If not, I believe that if you extended the length of time of the log, you would have eventually described this kind of situation.

Remember, emotional sobriety helps you know yourself, know where your center is, and hold on to it. One of the things you need to learn to do to hold on to your center is to stop letting other people *edit your reality*. Our emotional dependency pulls for a certain kind of togetherness or connection. It demands that we feel the same, and think the same, if we are to feel close to another person. So if we feel a certain way about something, we demand that our partner or friends feel this way too. If not, we falsely conclude that we aren't together. Remember, this kind of closeness is emotional fusion, not genuine intimacy.

If you are rigorously honest with yourself, you know that you have a long way to go. Do not be discouraged; no one among us

About the Author

Allen Berger, Ph.D., is a nationally recognized expert on the science of recovery. He is the author of Hazelden's popular *12 Stupid Things That Mess Up Recovery*. He is widely recognized for his work in several areas of recovery that include

- integrating modern psychotherapy with the Twelve Steps
- helping new patients understand the benefits of group therapy and how to get the most out of it
- emotional sobriety
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Hazelden, a national nonprofit organization founded in 1949, helps people reclaim their lives from the disease of addiction. Built on decades of knowledge and experience, Hazelden offers a comprehensive approach to addiction that addresses the full range of patient, family, and professional needs, including treatment and continuing care for youth and adults, research, higher learning, public education and advocacy, and publishing.

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Jerry McDonald, ACATA

Producer, Drug Awareness Hour at the Betty Ford Center

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It is in these practices that we find release from what Bill W. described as an "absolute dependence" on people or circumstances. We can then develop the tools to find strength within.



Allen Berger, Ph.D., is a nationally recognized expert on the science of recovery. For more than thirty years, he has been on his own journey in recovery while helping thousands of others discover a way of life free from addiction.

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