

24 Emotional Entanglements

Falling in love with your doctor or nurse or a fellow patient is an old romantic story. Recovering alcoholics are susceptible to the same fever. In fact, alcoholism does not seem to bring immunity from any known human condition.

Sorrow is born in the hasty heart, an old saw goes. Other troubles, including an alcoholic bout, can be, too.

During our days of bottles, cans, and glasses, many of us spent a lot of time concerned about intimate personal ties. Whether we wanted temporary partnerships or a long-term "meaningful relationship," we were often preoccupied with our deep involvement—or noninvolvement—with other people.

A great many of us blamed our drinking on lack of affection, saw ourselves as constantly in search of love, drinking as we prowled from bar to party. Others of us apparently had all the emotional ties we needed or wanted, but drank anyhow. Either way, alcohol certainly did not ripen our comprehension of mature love, nor our ability to enter into and handle it if it did come our way. Rather, our drinking lives left our emotional selves pinched, scraped, bent, and bruised, if not pretty firmly warped.

So, as our experience shows, the first non-drinking days are likely to be periods of great emotional vulnerability. Is this an extended pharmacological effect of the drinking? Is it a natural state for anyone recuperating from a long and severe illness? Or does it indicate a deep flaw in the personality? The answer doesn't matter at first. Whatever the cause, the condition is one we have to watch out for, because it can tempt us to drink faster than the eye, head, or heart can realize.

We have seen such relapses happen in several ways. In the early relief and delight of getting well, we can whip up enormous crushes on new people we meet, both in AA and outside it, especially when they show genuine interest in us, or seem to gaze up at us in admiration. The giddy rapture this can bring makes us highly susceptible to a drink.

An emotional opposite can also be the case. We may seem so numb that we are almost immune to affection for a while after stopping drinking. (Clinicians tell us

it is common for people to have no interest or very much ability in sex for many months after stopping drinking—but that problem straightens itself out beautifully as health returns. We know!) Until we are assured that the numbness will pass, going back to drinking appears an attractive "remedy," which leads to even worse trouble.

Our shaky emotional condition also affects our feelings toward old friends and family. For many of us, these relationships seem to heal promptly as we pursue recovery. For others, there arrives a period of touchiness at home; now that we're sober, we have to sort out how we actually feel about spouse, children, siblings, parents, or neighbors, then reexamine our behavior. Fellow workers, clients, employees, or employers also require such attention.

(Often, our drinking has had a severe emotional impact on those closest to us, and they, too, may need help in recovering. They may turn to Al-Anon Family Groups and Alateen [see your telephone directory]. Although these fellowships are not officially connected with AA, they are very similar, and they help nonalcoholic relatives and friends to live more comfortably with knowledge about us and our condition.)

Over the years, we have become strongly convinced that almost no important decisions should be arrived at early in our sobriety, unless they cannot possibly be delayed. This caution particularly applies to decisions about people, decisions with high emotional potential. The first, uncertain weeks of sobriety are no time to rush into major life changes.

Another caution: Tying our sobriety to someone we are emotionally involved with proves flatly disastrous. "I'll stay sober if so-and-so does this or that" puts an unhealthy condition on our recovery. We have to stay sober for ourselves, no matter what other people do or fail to do.

We should remember, too, that intense dislike also is an emotional entanglement, often a reversal of past love. We need to cool *any* overboard feeling, lest it flip us back into the drink.

It is easy to consider yourself an exception to this generalization. Newly sober, you may earnestly believe that you have at long last found *real* love—or that your

you may earnestly believe that you have a long lost love and that your present attitude of dislike, persisting even into sobriety, means there always was something fundamentally wrong about the relationship. In either instance, you *may* be right—but just now, it's wise to wait and see whether your attitude will change.

Again and again, we have seen such feelings change dramatically in only a few months of sobriety. So, using "First Things First," we have found it helpful to concentrate first on sobriety alone, steering clear of any risky emotional entanglements.

Immature or premature liaisons are crippling to recovery. Only after we have had time to mature somewhat beyond merely not drinking are we equipped to relate maturely to other people.

When our sobriety has a foundation firm enough to withstand stress, *then* we are ready to work through and straighten out other aspects of our lives.