

# SereneScene

Magazine for Long-Term Healthy Lifestyles of Recovery

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## DEVELOPING HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS IN RECOVERY

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"ALONE!" By Jay Kolo

"SA COUNSELORS OF THE FUTURE: RECOVERY COACHES, CARE COORDINATORS, OR PH.DS?" By Alison Knopf

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We are human and we need relationships. Relationships afford us the opportunity to find purpose, feel connected, and experience joy. When we are recovering humans, we need three types of relationships to be successful in developing a long-term quality lifestyle of recovery without drugs, alcohol and behavioral acting out.



Recovery begins with a relationship with one's self while remaining abstinent from drugs and alcohol and/or acting appropriately with regard to impulse control. It is only with discipline and acceptance that we can begin to discover who we really are underneath the addict behaviors. Once in recovery, there is a tremendous amount of self-discovery that needs to take place. Some of this work is very scary because we may have to confront some horrible past behaviors and pain. With diligent work, we accept who we once were, and who we are today. We eventually forgive ourselves for past behavior and hold ourselves accountable to a newly developed set of healthy boundaries. It is now that we know ourselves honestly, and can happily engage in a relationship with ourselves.

In early recovery, we develop friendships with others in recovery. We may engage a therapist or sponsor or recovery coach, and we develop new relationships with family members based on different boundaries and expectations. These people are included in our support

system. They love us for who we are, and we love them back. We can rely on them for healthy assistance and to provide us with encouragement and advice when we need it. In turn, we support them in a mutual exchange of loving friendship. Perhaps we also develop a romantic relationship with someone we love on an intimate level, and we find devotion for another: more on this later in the article.

At some point in our recovery effort, we also create a relationship with our own higher power. We find humility in ourselves while cultivating a consortium of morals, ethics, and principles. We allow forgiveness to enter into our hearts, and we discover gratitude for life's journey inclusive of our struggles and triumphs. We experience empathy and compassion for our fellow human, and we find our spirit can be fulfilled instead of being avoided.

But how do we journey from a place of encountering only destructive, selfish and dysfunctional relationships to enjoying the beauty of healthy relationships when all we know is the former? The answer is much the same as how we journey from a place of actively using and acting out to a state of abstinence and healthy behavior: we commit to learning about new behaviors and implementing them in our own lives. We must recognize our old patterns, and then we must put in the hard work to change those patterns.

There are a couple of maxims regularly spoken within the rooms of self-help programs.

*Alcoholics don't have relationships – they take hostages.*

*Codependents don't have relationships – they have caseloads.*

While these sayings are amusing, they also hold some truth. We must find recovery before we attempt to develop healthy relationships, for without recovery we will simply repeat the same relationship mistakes we previously made, and we will likely lose recovery in the process.

Before addressing the specifics of how to develop a healthy relationship in recovery, it is important to review a few very common mistakes when attempting to engage in a romantic relationship in early recovery.

- The pursuit of sex and excitement. Our

addict and codependent behavior seeks out the dramatic impact that sex and excitement have to offer, however there is no intimacy, connection or security in this type of relationship.

- The distraction of romance. New romantic relationships have all sorts of effects on our bodies and our minds. There are numerous hormones released that make us feel bubbly and intensely focused. We also experience the excitement of not knowing what's going to happen next: everything seems new. All of this distracts us from the real work of self-awareness and behavioral change that is required for long-term quality of life and quality of relationships. Very soon, we stop tending to ourselves, and begin to focus mostly on the relationship.

- Feeling incomplete without a relationship. Much of the journey of early recovery is about finding ourselves spiritually. It is common for us to get impatient and look for a relationship with someone to serve as a surrogate for our higher power in order to feel complete. However, another individual is not the same as a higher power, and therefore cannot complete us.

- Keeping old friends. So many of us want desperately to keep our old friends. These are people that we drank, used drugs and acted out with. We have close bonds with them, they are not our old using buddies, and they are our beloved friends. However, it is necessary to let them go from our lives so that we may focus on developing more healthy relationships with loved ones that will support our new found healthy behaviors.

- Unrealistic expectations. We want it all, and we want it now – at least that is what our unhealthy selves are communicating. The reality is that healthy relationships take a long time to develop, and they have many ups and downs along the way. It is important to remain committed to the process and work through the problems as they come along.

- Avoid conflict. Old habits die hard, but this one must encounter its demise. When we avoid conflict we build resentments toward others and the resentments are like cancers for relationships. Instead we must use the tools of effective communication to deal with problems and not let them fester.
- Putting up with inappropriate behavior. If our partner is scaring us, deliberately hurting us, or attempting to control us physically or emotionally, we must leave the relationship. We do not need to endure misery in our relationships.



## Developing a Healthy Relationship in Recovery

Relationships, especially romantic relationships, come in all different shapes, sizes, colors and intensities; we cannot compartmentalize everyone into the same group of guidelines. However, there are some fundamental relationship practices that seem to benefit almost everyone.

- Be responsible and accountable. We need to follow through on our commitments most of the time, and when we do not, we need to make amends. This is a simple concept that can be difficult to practice because ego and shame gets in the way, and sometimes it seems easier to blame others than to take responsibility for ourselves. Our morals and ethics must be the guideposts by which we navigate our relationship and life.

- Communicate, communicate, and communicate. Talking, gesturing, writing, texting and all other forms of communication are vital to a healthy relationship. It is through communication that we understand each other. We hear one another's views and we express our own views. Communication is a tool, and effective communication can be learned. Keep in mind that effective communication does not mean that there is agreement all the time, it just means that each person has been heard.
- Share the truth. Firstly, we must share the truth with ourselves if we are inclined to routinely hide honest expression in denial or avoidance. Once the truth is realized, we must communicate the truth to our loved ones and establish a foundation of trust and reliance. We must communicate truth in both the positive and negative connotations, and never take our partner for granted.
- Make reasonable expectations. We all have expectations of one another, and that is healthy. Where we often do not follow through is on communicating what our expectations of one another are. Then, when our partner does not live up to our non-communicated expectation of them, we develop resentments toward them. We must be able to express our expectations without fear of reprisal, and we must be able to understand our partner's expectations of ourselves as well. Remember that we are not perfect by any means, and neither is our partner.
- Happiness is my own. We can sometimes think that our happiness is dependent upon another person's behaviors or attitude toward us. The truth is that we must possess our own happiness. Our happiness is centered on how we perceive our world. We do not need to take the blame for something we truly do not have any responsibility for, and we do not need to feel badly just because our partner has encountered a bad day. We can even be happy when things are not ideal.

- Develop consensus. We will not agree with our partner on everything, and that is absolutely fine as long as we can both live with the fact that we disagree. If we can communicate our disagreements to one another and feel understood, then we can develop a consensus on how to proceed. The clearer we are in our consensus agreement the better.
- Forgive. We live in the present, our emotions and our thoughts all take place in the now. So why is it that we so often dredge up the past so we can punish our partner? We can forgive our partner's past mistakes and let go of the hold that our resentments have over us. Sometimes we also must forgive ourselves for our past mistakes so we can move on and enjoy the wonder that is in the moment.
- Appreciation and respect. We love another person for many reasons but we can lose sight of those reasons when emotions are high. If we can keep our appreciation of our loved one in view, then we can better handle conflicts when they arise. We will also find ourselves feeling more spiritually connected to our loved one and that makes everyone feel great. We must respect that the way we feel may be different that the way our loved one feels, and with mutual respect we can navigate even the most difficult situations together.
- Enjoy the journey. Our relationships with others are a significant part of our journey in life. Through times of abundance and times of strife our relationships uniquely impact our experience. If we allow ourselves and our partners to fully participate in the journey, and we keep our perception of our world in check, we will be able to find joy in our lives.
- Apologize. When we have an argument, or when we commit a mistake, we can say we are sorry for our part. Even if our partner cannot say they are sorry, we can still take care of our responsibility and apologize for our part in the situation. If we find ourselves

- always feeling the need to be right, then we need to invest some time in understanding our true level of importance in this world. With some humility will come the ability to admit our mistakes and live life with our partner in a more pleasant and fulfilling way.
- Give support. As life ebbs and flows there will be times that our partner will need extra support, and we must be there to provide it. We must provide them with our love and understanding, listen with an empathetic ear, and help them to understand that they are more important to us than the challenge at hand.
- Enjoy one another. We must make time to experience our relationship together, without the distractions of the routine day. We can make a date night, or regularly plan special occasions for just us.

This article began by explaining the three types of relationships we must have in recovery: self, support system, and higher power. We have focused on the support system relationship and romantic relationships that are contained within the support system. With time and dedication, these principles of healthy relationships will dramatically improve the quality of our lives.

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