

POCKET POWER

LOVING

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RELATIONSHIPS



Hazelden®

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LOVING RELATIONSHIPS

In the past, we had our loving relationships with our addictions rather than with people. We became increasingly isolated from those around us. We may have attempted to reach out to others, but our efforts were unsuccessful because we didn't understand what had happened to us. When we initiate a recovery program, we learn we are not alone and there are many others who have struggled as we have. We learn we *can* change, and we see loving relationships are a possibility and, in fact, a necessity. We are all capable of having loving relationships!

Loving Relationships Bloom Over Time

A loving relationship is not an entity to be possessed. Loving relationships evolve, just as individuals change from day to day and develop into new and healthier people. Relationships are a process; they are not static. Like a rose unfolding, a relationship should be enjoyed and treasured through each stage of blossoming.

To begin a loving relationship, we must be open, trusting ourselves and others. Trust and openness depend on each other in loving relationships and, for most of us, require courage.

The Serenity Prayer has helped many of us find the courage within to risk trust and openness.

Twelve Step programs emphasize the necessity of acceptance of ourselves and our imperfections, and acceptance of others and their imperfections. This quality gives us the flexibility to be gentle with ourselves and to interact with others in a healthy manner.

As we grew up, we developed many beliefs about relationships and how they should be conducted. As a result of these beliefs, we created many painful relationships. We then blamed ourselves and those we were involved with. This created further pain. The only way out is when we begin to see that we must challenge our old beliefs in order to experience fulfilling and joyful relationships. Some of these beliefs may include perceptions about traditional role models for men and women. They also include stereotypes of how women and men express their feelings, such as “hysterical women” or “macho men.” Society seems to demand that we be in relationships, and that ideally, these relationships should culminate in marriage and children. If we find ourselves living in ways that don’t match these beliefs, we may be filled with negative feelings about ourselves and society.

We have been living in such a way that we

have given power to a variety of external sources. We must live our lives from the inside out, not from the outside in as we have been doing. The only true source of good feelings is within us.

Learning to Value Ourselves

Before we can have loving relationships with others, we must develop loving relationships with ourselves. Many of us have neglected and abused ourselves in the process of our addictions. We came to hate ourselves and discounted our value as we became more isolated and out of touch with our lives. We were no longer fully alive; we were dying inside. We need to learn to value ourselves for who we are. Initially, we may not know who we are, but as we nurture our budding new selves, we discover qualities within that we have either forgotten or overlooked. Many of us easily identify qualities we despise about ourselves. Yet, within them, at least there is always a seed of strength.

For example, we may know of our perfectionism and recognize the negative consequences. However, we may not see the positive aspects of perfectionism: caring, diligence, and a desire to achieve and do better. Perfectionism is an example of losing perspective on what is truly

important as a result of our underlying insecurity. Sometimes, we judge our positive qualities as insignificant. Consider the person who has a delightful sense of humor, yet is unable to see how this can contribute to a healthy lifestyle or a loving relationship.

As we develop personal recovery programs through the Twelve Steps, we begin to see the need to take care of ourselves, and we learn about our capabilities and potentials. This is less a matter of building self-esteem than it is a matter of clearing up, calming down, and liberating the natural good feelings that were locked inside throughout our addiction. The process of addiction was our innocent search for wholeness. In the beginning, our efforts appeared to be successful to some degree, or we would not have continued. However, our addictions were external solutions; we were living life from the outside in. Through recovery, we are learning who we are, and we are able to love ourselves in spite of our imperfections. It is more helpful to accentuate and nurture our positive qualities rather than dwell on our negative ones.

Awareness of a Higher Power

An integral part of coming to love ourselves arises from a developing awareness of a Power

greater than ourselves. This awareness is the cornerstone of true self-esteem. It provides an unshakable foundation on which to build loving relationships with ourselves and others. It does not matter what we name this Power; some call it God, others Divine Consciousness, and others have called it the Force. The *Big Book* describes it as “an unsuspected inner resource.” There are countless other names. It is clear this Power is not only external but also exists within, however aware or unaware of it we may be.

The result of our growing awareness of a Higher Power, as well as our consciousness of our own natural self-esteem, is that we become capable of forming truly loving relationships with others. As we become more involved with others in healthy ways, we gain further insights into ourselves and our Higher Power. These three areas — our Higher Power, others, and ourselves — are so interwoven that progress in one area can also be seen in the other two areas.

The foundation of a loving relationship is a quiet mind, bringing a sense of serenity. Our minds are quiet when they are free of the continual mental chatter we often indulge in, without realizing such thoughts are the source of our pain and unhappiness. Much of this chatter — our mental radio — is derived from those old belief systems we're so attached to. When we

begin to quiet this inner dialogue, we allow our natural wisdom to come forth, and we become more receptive to insights. With a quiet, clear mind we can begin to dream new dreams. We can envision loving relationships for ourselves.

One thing that will help us drop these old beliefs and quiet our minds is the ability to laugh, both at ourselves and with others. A sense of humor will allow us to take ourselves less seriously and to gain a more realistic perspective on our problems and capabilities.

Many of us have been engulfed in resentments we've directed toward ourselves or others. When we learn to take ourselves and the world less seriously and see that many of our judgments have been based on the old and faulty beliefs, our ability to forgive is enhanced.

Gratitude is essential. Focusing on what is right in our lives and in the world creates a feeling of gratitude. When we are grateful, we tend to believe in ourselves more. We're more self-confident and find it easier to take risks, allowing ourselves to be vulnerable. It is only from this position that we can enter into a truly loving relationship.

Focusing on Positive Thoughts

Within our loving relationships, we must continue our efforts to grow in all areas of our lives. It is important to see the role of thought in our well-being. We all have thoughts, and our thoughts create the realities in which we live. However, we often forget we are the thinker. We fail to realize our feelings are the result of our attitudes or beliefs. A danger lies in seeing our thoughts as facts, taking them as inescapable reality. We can become entangled in these thoughts. How we perceive things depends on the emotional state we are in. For example, if we are in a negative mood, we will likely hear an innocent remark as a personal putdown. It is helpful for us to be aware of our negative moods and how they affect the way we see the world around us.

Our minds are clearer when we feel good, and we are less likely to be confused by the details of our problems. We can take a larger view of the situation and act from a higher level of awareness. We begin to see that we don't have to make ourselves feel good; we only have to stop making ourselves feel bad. Good feelings are inherent.

On the spiritual level, we must nurture our inner wisdom — that still, small voice that

many of us have spent years ignoring. We must learn to listen to this voice; it is our connection to our Higher Power. The quieter our minds are, the more we hear this voice and open up to insights that allow us to create lasting love and health for ourselves.

Part of loving ourselves is treating our bodies with respect. When we are listening to our inner wisdom, this respect is merely a matter of common sense. We know we must get enough rest, eat properly, and exercise regularly. If we find ourselves in a bad mood, we may be overtired and may simply need a nap. Perhaps we have been so busy our eating habits have been irregular, and we need to have a nutritious meal. And it has been said that exercise is the best remedy for depression. Clearly, when we are not feeling good physically, it affects the way we think, the way we feel emotionally, and the way we interact with others.

As our relationships with ourselves develop and we become healthier, we renew old friendships and form new ones. Friendships are loving relationships and are an essential part of life. They help prepare us for a more meaningful loving relationship. In fact, friendship is the vital ingredient of the significant, deeper loving relationship we are seeking.

Respecting Another's Differences

When we are falling in love we see the other person as perfect, or we ignore his or her faults. We are filled with exhilaration. We see the world through rose-colored glasses. We attribute our good feelings to the presence of that other person in our life. But, most of us have not realized these feelings come from within ourselves. The other person is only a catalyst.

As the relationship continues, the intense feelings may fade. We may experience renewed fears of intimacy and become more insecure. We then become judgmental and begin to focus on each other's imperfections. The more seriously we take these judgments, the more we will blame the other for our negative feelings. Our old beliefs and attitudes can easily resurface. For example, we may find ourselves thinking, "I'm not capable of a good relationship, I don't deserve one." Or we may make sweeping generalizations, such as "men can't be trusted," "women can't be trusted," "relationships never last." When we catch ourselves being judgmental of others, we need to remember we each have our own way of looking at things. These are only thoughts, and we have a choice of how seriously we want to take them.

We all see the world from a special point of view, and we each may draw entirely different conclusions about the same event. We often expect others to see things our way, and we waste hours in frustration trying to convince them of our views. We may have forgotten that some of those differences were the elements that helped us fall in love. If this happens to us, we are losing our perspective and beginning to take our thoughts too seriously.

Letting go of our attempts to control another is a remedy for this. We can let go of trying to make this person into something he or she is not. We can begin to appreciate our personality differences once again and see the richness the other can bring to our life by sharing unique perceptions. We need to cultivate gratitude within the relationship by focusing on what we like about it. We can even find value in aspects of the relationship that we are least comfortable with. When we look at what we can learn from this, we are more apt to feel grateful and forgiving. We can accept this person. The more accepting and forgiving we are of ourselves, the more accepting and forgiving we will be of another.

Living in the Present

Our relationship with our Higher Power is strengthened through involvement with others in Twelve Step programs. We hear wisdom we can use by listening to others as they deal with their problems. One of the most valuable principles we are reminded of in Twelve Step programs is living one day at a time. This helps us live fully in the moment, which is an essential part of living in an intimate relationship. All we really have is the moment. If we are crippled by past memories or frightened by future worries, we miss the beauty of relationships and of the day as it unfolds. We also become more disconnected from who we are. Living in the moment takes faith in ourselves, others, and our Higher Power.

We are always changing. Living in the present allows us to see each other more clearly, unhampered by our past judgments or future expectations of others. We can be closer to others when we live in the moment. We see one another in new light, and we are able to celebrate our differences and similarities when we live one day at a time.

Loving relationships are possible for us, and all relationships can be loving. A healthy relationship is distinguished by the awareness that

we *choose* to be there rather than believing we *need* to be there. We must love ourselves, have faith in a Higher Power, and respect others. None of us will do this perfectly all of the time. But we can learn to be gentle with ourselves and know we strive for progress not perfection. And every day we learn.

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