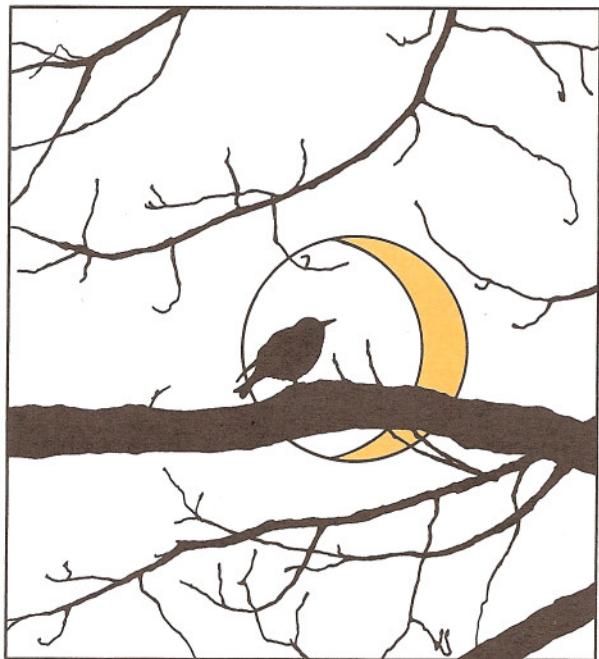


POCKET POWER

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PATIENCE



Hazelden

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The logo for Hazelden, featuring a stylized, gothic-style letter 'H' followed by the word 'azelden' in a serif font.

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PATIENCE

Patience is an elusive goal for recovering people, one we need to work at everyday. In our efforts to become patient, we face many obstacles. Some of the most formidable are self-centeredness and self-will, a low tolerance for pain, lack of discipline, our rush to gain lost time, and perfectionism.

These obstacles are familiar; they are some of our old character defects, the symptoms of our disease. We can overcome these obstacles if we are willing to devote ourselves to a program of spiritual growth. While we may never become truly patient people, it is possible, in fact, it is essential, to keep from being driven by impatience.

Freedom from the Bondage of Self

When we were using, we thought the world revolved around us. At the center of the universe, we played the maestro, trying to direct the orchestra of people and events in our lives. When people didn't behave as we wished, when circumstances didn't proceed according to our design, we became impatient and pressed harder to get control. When the full force of our will

failed to bring the desired results, we became angry, resentful, and self-pitying. More often than not, those negative feelings provided us with a good excuse for using. That is what the *Big Book* calls “self-will run riot.”

In taking the First Step on the road to recovery, we admitted we hadn't done such a great job of managing the show. Not only could we not control the world, but in the face of our addiction, we were powerless over ourselves. When we saw people in the program who had begun to recover from their addictions and rebuild their lives, we came to believe that by relying not on our own will, but on the help of a Higher Power, we, too, could regain some sanity in our lives. In time we were able to let go our choke hold on self-will, and made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to a God of our own choosing.

Through our experience in the program, we have learned that letting go and letting God is not a one-time choice that forever frees us from self-will. We need to make that decision over and over again, when we don't get the promotion we think we deserve, when a loved one doesn't return our affections, when our child misbehaves. Whenever things don't go our way, our self-will tempts us to take back control from our God. Such slips need not discourage us. We

realize sobriety is just a beginning; it does not result in an overnight change of character. Recovery is a process, and our character defects wear off gradually.

By practicing the principles of the Twelve Step program, we can daily reaffirm our decision to rely on God's will rather than our own. When we feel ourselves becoming impatient and willful, we can turn to our Higher Power and ask for help in overcoming our self-will. This Third Step prayer can help: “God I offer myself to Thee — to build with and to do with me as Thou wilt. Relieve me of the bondage of self, that I may better do Thy will. Take away my difficulties, that victory over them may bear witness to those I would help of Thy Power, Thy Love, and Thy Way of Life. May I do Thy will always!”

When we pray, we can be secure in the knowledge that all of our prayers *are* answered. The answers may not be the ones we hoped for, and they might not come when we expect. God's answers come in their own special time, place, and manner. As we make progress in our recovery, we will find that our will becomes more and more like God's will for us. As that happens, our troubles with impatience diminish.

The Lessons of Pain

Patience comes from the Latin word meaning *to suffer*. When we began our recovery, we realized we had little experience in suffering. For years we had tried to avoid suffering, to dull the pain by using. For a time, it seemed to work. The booze (or pills, or food, whatever the object of our addiction) numbed us against pain, and against the rest of our feelings, too. It is not surprising that, once we removed the buffer that separated us from the real world, we were overwhelmed by the hurt. We had not developed the patience to suffer through pain.

Through sobriety, we are learning life is sometimes difficult, full of pain as well as joy. Now we see we cannot get around life's problems by ignoring them or by deadening ourselves against the pain so we can forget the problems that caused that pain.

Pain is a natural part of our growth and development as human beings. Benjamin Franklin said, "Those things that hurt, instruct." Our friends in the program remind us: "No pain, no gain." There are many lessons to be learned from pain, if only we have the willingness to learn them. If we but ask, God will give us the courage to stop running away from painful situations, to face pain head-on, and deal with it

honestly.

One of the lessons of pain is that it motivates us to change. Change is difficult for all of us. We tend to cling to our old habits because they are familiar and safe. Even when an old behavior hurts us, we prefer it to the unknown risks of change. It is often only when the pain of our old ways overwhelms us that we will stop resisting change and the growth that it holds.

Another of the lessons of pain is gratitude. Our ability to feel pain signals the return of our other feelings, including joy, love, and serenity. As we learn to "stand still and hurt," we become thankful to God for reawakening our capacity to experience fully the range of human emotions.

When we are hurting, it is helpful to remember two things. First, nothing lasts forever. It is much easier to face the difficulties of the moment when we remind ourselves that this, too, shall pass. Second, God never burdens us with more than we can handle. If we had to face all the trials of a lifetime in one day, we would be devastated by the suffering. But we are not called upon to do that. If we concentrate on suffering through only today's trials and trust in God's Power to see us through them, we will grow in patience.

One Day at a Time

A Sanskrit proverb challenges us: "Look to this day, for it is life, the very life of life. In its brief course lie all the realities and verities of existence, the bliss of growth, the splendor of action, the glory of power — for yesterday is but a dream, and tomorrow is only a vision, but today, well-lived, makes every yesterday a dream of happiness and every tomorrow a vision of hope. Look well, therefore, to this day."

Why is it so hard for addicts to live one day at a time? One reason is that we want what we want *when we want it*. When we were using, our self-discipline was limited to doing what was needed to protect our supply. Our single goal was the immediate pleasure provided by a drink or a pill or a chocolate bar. Part of patience is recognizing the difference between our needs and our wants. It means trusting that our real needs will always be met.

Sobriety helped us clear the cobwebs out of our minds. Recovery has enabled us to take an honest look at our lives and make some sane choices about the course we want to take. We see that in order to achieve our goals, we need to get some discipline in our lives and learn how to pass up the pleasure of immediate gratification in favor of long-term objectives.

It is hard to practice perseverance, to keep on hoeing the long row, especially when the end is out of sight. One of the keys to developing self-discipline is accepting responsibility for our lives. Turning our will and our lives over to God does not relieve us of accountability. We choose how we think and feel and act, and we choose the consequences of those thoughts, feelings, and actions. Understanding that will help us put forth our best efforts each day, knowing that God will give us the strength to face tomorrow.

Keeping it simple is good advice when we are building self-discipline. By starting out with small, reasonable goals, we maximize our chances of reaching them. Even one small success can do much to bolster our confidence and reinforce our efforts. Sharing our goals with someone in the program is another way to strengthen our resolve. It has the added benefit of gaining us the support and encouragement of a friend. By being responsible for those things we can affect and relying on our Higher Power for what is beyond our control, we can learn to welcome each day as a new beginning.

Slowing Down

Many people miss the magic of the present moment because they are dashing about, trying to accomplish too much too fast. For recovering people, “life in the fast lane” can lead to disaster. We may think we have good reason to rush. When we sobered up, we noticed how limited our lives had been when we were using. Our spiritual and emotional growth had been stunted by our addiction. We were anxious about all the years we had “wasted.” And we were impatient to make up for lost time, to hasten our development, and fill our empty lives. We threw ourselves into every experience we encountered, befriended everyone we met, turned our lives upside down in a massive self-improvement campaign.

In our compulsive activity, we may forget to tend to our basic spiritual, emotional, and physical needs. At meetings, people remind us “easy does it.” They also point out to us the warning signals telling us to HALT: hungry, angry, lonely, tired. We need to pay attention to those warning signals, just as we must heed the warning lights on our dashboard.

Practicing the Eleventh Step will help us slow down. Prayer and meditation, moments of quiet communion with our Higher Power, calm

our urgent need to move. They help us gain the perspective that we cannot see in the midst of our busyness. Slowing down is essential to balance, and balance nurtures patience.

Acceptance, Forgiveness, and Gratitude

Perfectionism is another hindrance to patience, for it robs us of gratitude. Perfectionism is the stubborn insistence that life must conform to our idealistic idea of what should be. We create a no-win situation for ourselves by setting standards so high that no one could possibly meet them. When, as inevitably happens, we fail to make the grade, we are filled with frustration, hopelessness, and self-loathing. Our unrealistic expectations blind us to the real headway we are making in recovery. This all-or-nothing attitude makes us impatient with others as well as with ourselves, for we find our co-workers, family, and friends are all imperfect human beings, too.

How do we combat such defeatist thinking and find a middle path between being absolutely perfect and perfectly worthless (that is, the path of being human)? To start, we summon all the honesty and humility we can muster, and we admit our mistakes. Taking a daily inventory will help us do that. But admitting our mis-

takes, in itself, is not enough to quiet our impatience. We must go a step further, and *forgive* ourselves for our human shortcomings. Forgiveness fosters self-love and acceptance, and makes possible acceptance and love of others and the world around us.

Acceptance shifts our focus from what is *not* to what *is*. Looking at life with clear eyes, unfogged by perfectionism, we cannot help but see how much we have to be grateful for. By daily renewing our appreciation of all of life — its ups and downs — we close the door on perfectionism and free ourselves from impatience.

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