A NEW PATH

By walking into our first Sexual Recovery Anonymous (SRA) meeting, we acknowledged that we had a problem. We also acknowledged that we were willing to look outside ourselves and to others for a solution. By coming to meetings, reading literature such as *Tools of the Program* and listening to others, we learned how to work the program and became sober for the first time in our lives.

Getting sober is a profound life change for a sex addict. There are often emotional upheavals and physical discomforts in early sobriety and withdrawal from sexual addiction. Perhaps it is as challenging a road as you will ever travel. Early sobriety can also be exciting and exhilarating at times. This pamphlet is written to assure you that you are not crazy or unique—others have gone this way before, have had similar thoughts and feelings, and are recovering.

COMMON FEARS AND FALSE EXPECTATIONS

In our addiction, acting out sexually was a ritual and the idea of stopping was frightening and unthinkable. We told ourselves that without the excitement of sexually acting out, our lives would become lonely and tiresome. Sober did not sound sexy and we were afraid of losing our sexual appeal and allure. We feared falling apart emotionally without our daily sexual fix and we could not imagine a life without it.

We especially feared the strangers in the meetings. How could we trust some stranger with the stories of our sexual behavior if we could not even trust the people we already knew? Of course, we would never be able to talk about our experiences in a room full of unfamiliar people who were listening as we described the things we did. These, as well as other fears and misconceptions, haunted us.

As we began to attend meetings, many things we heard troubled us. There were slogans we'd never heard before and didn't understand. Also, talk of the mysterious Twelve Steps made little sense. "These people are sicker than I am," we told ourselves. "How can they be of help to me?" Then someone shared about a higher power. "Sound the alarm!" Must we swallow this religious mumbo-jumbo in order to find peace? Must we join a deranged, brainwashing cult just to get better?

Finally, we heard that sobriety included not masturbating one day at a time. "Isn't that harmful? If I stop being sexual, won't my sexuality just dry up? Won't I explode?" We believed that if we didn't have sex we would die. Even if we had attempted to stop in the past, we had been propelled more deeply into the acting out. We had rarely known a period of time without the numbing effects of masturbation and were afraid to try.

Also, the thought of spending time in the meetings was cause for concern. "I'll lose myself, my personality. I'll become a non-entity." *Then* someone suggested that we attend as many meetings as possible. This felt like a momentous life-style change. "I'll have to give up too many things—I won't have a life!" But we showed up, continuing to come to meetings.

Some of us found it difficult spending time with other addicts because we had become so used to surviving alone. Even after we came to SRA, we assumed getting better was something we had to manage by ourselves. The thought of reaching out for help seemed frightening and risky. We couldn't understand why another human being would be interested in helping us. We were certain that sharing the shame of our past with others in the program would mean instant reproach, especially if they heard many of the secrets we had kept hidden for countless years.

In spite of our fear and skepticism, we asked other addicts for their phone numbers, as it was strongly suggested. Nevertheless, many of us were afraid to call. "He doesn't really want to hear from me," or "It's just too late to call her," were things we told ourselves. However, when we did call, we were amazed to find that fellow addicts listened to our pain—many times until the wee hours of the morning—not judging, not criticizing, but simply listening and sharing their own experience. We found this to be one of many examples of how our experience of early sobriety was quite different from what we had feared and imagined.

THE REALITY OF EARLY SOBRIETY

Our addiction had become familiar to us, our constant companion. Without the adrenaline of excitement, the anesthetic of sex, we faced withdrawal and were propelled into the world of real feelings.

Generally, withdrawal in early sobriety was a turbulent experience. It was like riding a roller coaster, with many highs and lows. We were confused and vulnerable. Emotions ranged from feelings of wholeness and wellness to feelings of despair and emptiness. Feelings that were unfamiliar overcame us in ways we didn't understand. Feelings that seemed familiar became deeper and more intense. Many of us were overwhelmed by anger, rage, fear, loneliness, sadness and depression. Some of us cried for the first time since childhood.

In addition to the emotional distress, many of us had physical discomfort such as sleeplessness, exhaustion, hyperactivity and headaches. Some of us felt as though we were gripping the edge of a cliff, distressed and in pain, barely keeping our sobriety.

Sometimes we felt so uncomfortable that we were sure the program wasn't working. When this happened, we often tried to convince ourselves that it was really okay to act out. Sometimes we told ourselves that it is only natural to have sex and that we should not deprive ourselves. "What harm can I do by masturbating? After all, I only use it to release tension or go to sleep," and so on. We even heard this from our friends and doctors.

Rationalize as we might, we found that the only way to get to the other side of early sobriety was to go through it. We knew deep inside that we faced a choice: experiencing repeatedly the self-destructive pain of our addiction or going through the healing pain of our withdrawal.

As we stayed with our recovery through this period, our feelings of shame began to dissolve. We started to believe in our hearts that we were not bad people. Over time we began to laugh again and enjoy ourselves in new and healthy ways.

STAYING SOBER

Given the challenges of early sobriety, many of us wondered how it was possible to stay sober. Some of us turned to experienced, sober members and asked, "How do you stay sober?" We may have received a different answer from each person we questioned. Some may even have said, "I don't know." This seemed confusing or frustrating at times—as addicts, many of us wanted an easy answer or a "fast track" on which to graduate from the program.

Most of us would say there is nothing we can do to guarantee our sobriety. However, it is reassuring to know that we have found that there are actions we can take that go a long way toward helping us on the recovery path. Some of these include going to meetings, reading literature, telephoning, working the steps, writing (keeping a journal of our feelings, for example), meditating, praying and remembering slogans that are meaningful to us. (For a thorough discussion, read the SRA pamphlet, *Tools of the Program*.)

Going to meetings is crucial to our sobriety. At meetings we find people who really understand, like no one else, what we are going through. Meetings provide an environment where there is freedom of expression and acceptance without judgment.

It is also at meetings where we find other members who are sober. Seeing and being with sober people can be an inspirational experience, showing us that others have done together what we could not do by ourselves. We asked one of these sober members to be our sponsor. We found it extremely helpful to get a sponsor quickly, as it kept us connected to the program.

Our sponsors told us that the first year of sobriety was a time when we needed to focus on recovery, keep things simple and be gentle with ourselves. One suggestion they made was to make no major changes during this period. Many of us found that at this time we did not have the clarity and judgment necessary for important decisions. Our perspective changed radically as our healing progressed. Some of us felt like different people after one year in the program.

THE FIRST YEAR OF SOBRIETY

In retrospect, we saw that the first year of sobriety was a process—not one event but a long series of related events. At times we believed that early sobriety would never end. In the beginning we were always asking ourselves, "Am I through early sobriety yet?"

Everyone's journey through early sobriety is different but there are similar experiences that many of us have shared. A common one was finding sobriety to be difficult. During this time, we would come to meetings thinking and saying, "I want to act out so bad." But somehow, with a lot of help from the fellowship, we stayed sober one day at a time, one hour at a time, and sometimes one minute at a time. This was something we could never have imagined doing. (Some of us had slips and had to start over several times before this became a reality, but we kept coming back.)

Another experience was finding that sobriety came easily. During this period we were filled with new energy and vitality. We felt hope. We began to believe that our lives were truly changing. We thought, "This is what sobriety is all about."

Whether our sobriety came with little problem or with great difficulty, almost all of us started to feel hope and a sense of well-being. But then there came a time when our good feelings seemed to be fading away. Many of us felt that the program was not working as well as it did in the beginning. It was a time when new and uncomfortable feelings started to emerge. We thought, "Something is wrong, it isn't working anymore." Our sponsors and others who had been through this assured us that this was a common experience.

With the support of the fellowship, those of us who persevered found something of immense value. We were showing up for our lives—we stayed with our uncomfortable feelings and didn't run away. We started to realize we were on a path that was healing us in ways we could never before have envisioned.

GIFTS OF SOBRIETY

As we emerged from this period we realized we were receiving valuable gifts from our sobriety: we began to establish or fulfill our relationship with a higher power; we began to know ourselves; we found new energy for hobbies and other interests; we built friendships based on mutual respect; we became part of a loving and supportive community; we started to feel a sense of wholeness.

These are only a few of the gifts of sobriety. Each new day that we stay sober and stay in recovery continues to bring us gifts—some dreamed of and many more never even imagined. Sobriety has given us the hope and faith that each new day can be a gift.

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SRA NEW YORK TRI-STATE
INTERGROUP

P.O BOX 73
NEW YORK, NY 10024

www.sexualrecovery.org

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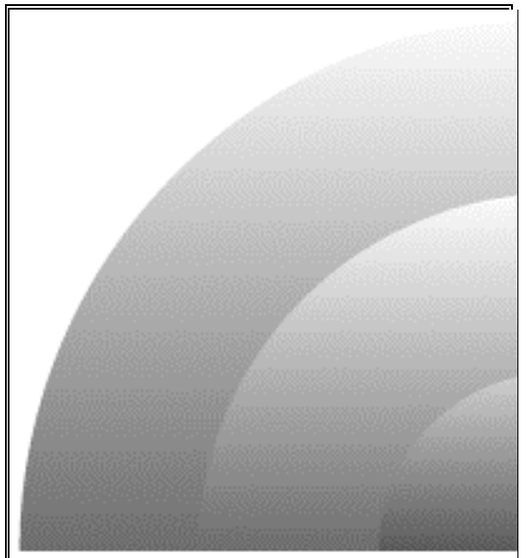

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early sobriety and withdrawal