



CASTLE CRAIG
HOSPITAL

Acceptance

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THE CASTLE CRAIG PAMPHLET SERIES





CASTLE CRAIG HOSPITAL

In choosing to publish our resource material on recovery from all forms of addiction, together with other related therapeutic material, we hope to extend this part of the experience available at Castle Craig Hospital to the community at large.

Addiction is a complex illness, and understanding it is a critical part of recovery. The educational elements to our programme - whether they be pamphlets, videos, lectures, workshops, or books - are a fundamental part of everyone's recovery journey. Education or insight alone do not produce recovery but they serve to inform, validate and motivate those struggling to take responsibility for change.

These pamphlets are dedicated to all those affected by addiction, be they sufferers themselves, family members, close friends, or those working in the health, psychiatric, therapeutic or social work sectors. We also gratefully acknowledge the help and support given by the Twelve Step fellowships.

Our educational materials offer a variety of information on addiction and related areas. These publications do not necessarily represent Castle Craig Hospital or its programmes, nor do they officially speak for any Twelve Step organisation.

The personal stories in this material are composites of many individuals and any resemblance to a single person, living or dead, is strictly coincidental.

Dr. Margaret Ann McCann





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*“God grant me the
serenity to accept the
things I cannot change,
the courage to change
the things I can and the
wisdom to know the
difference”.*

*Reinhold Niebuhr’s
Serenity Prayer*

Acceptance

Reinhold Niebuhr's Serenity Prayer has helped millions of people to find peace of mind. Some were addicts, many were not. This short message to "Make the best use of what is in your power, and take the rest as it happens" has actually been around for centuries in many forms, but it was Niebuhr's simple words that really resonated with the masses. First expressed in the late 1930s (exact date uncertain), the Serenity Prayer came at a time when the pressures of the twentieth century were beginning to produce alarming signs of stress in the so-called civilised world. High on the list of such signs was addiction and it has remained there ever since.

Coming to terms with ourselves and our lives is the essence of acceptance and without acceptance we cannot find true serenity. As the world gets more and more complex through our own efforts at 'progress', paradoxically, life becomes more and more difficult to cope with. For many people it becomes too much and fear, anxiety and panic take over. Many find the only way out of this is through alcohol and drugs.

"*Life is difficult*" are the opening words of 'The Road Less Travelled' by American psychologist M Scott Peck. He goes on to say:

"Once we truly know that life is difficult – once we truly understand and accept it – then life is no longer difficult. Because once it is accepted, the fact that life is difficult no longer matters".

It may seem obvious, but acceptance - accepting things exactly as they are - can be the key that we need to unlock the door to the happiness that we all have a right to. But instead of trying to change

the whole world so as to make it more manageable for us, what we actually have to change is ourselves. I can only change myself, no-one else. As writer Sandy Swenson put it so well in her adaptation of the Serenity Prayer:

“God grant me the serenity to accept the one I cannot change, the courage to change the one I can and the wisdom to know it’s me!”

So how can we change ourselves? Certainly it will not be easy, in fact it will probably be the most difficult thing that we ever do. For sure, we will need help but for those in recovery from addiction there is good news, because help is at hand.

Here is Scott Peck again:

“...the great blessing of alcoholism is the nature of the disease. It puts people into a visible crisis, and as a result into a community - an AA group.”

To put it another way: those who have been unable to cope with life and have become addicted are lucky enough to have a ready-made twelve step programme to help them to recover and find peace of mind.

Acceptance as a goal of recovery

Serenity and peace of mind will not be achieved unless first we identify acceptance as a goal of recovery from addiction. It is the key to changing our lives, as expressed so well in the Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous:

“And acceptance is the answer to all my problems today. When I am disturbed, it is because I find some person, place, thing, or situation – some fact of my life – unacceptable to me, and I can find no serenity until I accept that person, place, thing, or situation as being exactly the way it is supposed to be at this moment. Nothing, absolutely nothing, happens in God’s world by mistake. Until I could accept my alcoholism, I could not stay sober; unless I accept life completely on life’s terms, I cannot be happy. I need to concentrate not so much on what needs to be changed in the world as on what needs to be changed in me and in my attitudes.”

Acceptance means admitting

For most people in early recovery, full acceptance is a relatively long term goal, not something that is going to happen in a rush. But if that is the future goal, then the first step towards reaching it is to admit the problem – the founding fathers of AA were right to make this the subject of Step 1 because it is the fundamental issue of successful recovery – it unlocks the door through which we enter into a new life.

At this stage, we take stock of the reality of the situation. It is easy to dwell on the negative aspects of the past and to look ahead to find unhappiness in things that have not and may never happen. That is not admittance – all we are asked to do in Step 1 is to accept the reality of our situation – that we are powerless over our addiction and that our lives have become unmanageable.

Crucial to the process of admitting that we have a problem is honesty – we have to really mean it. A lot of addicts are not prepared

to do this thoroughly – they have trained themselves so well to accept the unacceptable that their denial is deeply rooted. They may, for example, be prepared to acknowledge that a problem exists but they will try to somehow justify the attendant behaviours through minimising, blaming others or procrastination. As the Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous states (Chapter 5), those who are incapable of being honest with themselves will be unlikely to succeed in recovery.

For many, admitting their powerlessness and unmanageability can be a lengthy and painful process but it must be completed thoroughly before moving on.

Acceptance means overcoming barriers

“The pain that you create now is always some form of non-acceptance, some form of unconscious resistance to what is. On the level of thought, the resistance is some form of judgment.”
(Eckhart Tolle, *The Power of Now.*)

Once we have dealt with the question of admittance and the denial that lurks behind it, we will need to address some other barriers in our quest for acceptance. The main causes of which are self-defeating attitudes and behaviours such as:

Control:

Life and its problems can be full of fear and uncertainty and often our response is to somehow seek to control it. The greater the perceived threat, the greater the need to control. This can often put us in conflict with the reality of the situation as we try to mould life into our own specifications. We have to learn to let go, to understand that we cannot control or manipulate situations; we can only do our best.

Acceptance means surrender

Avoidance:

It has been said that the human instinct to avoid problems, with the emotional pain that they bring, is the primary basis of all mental illness. In the words of Carl Jung: *“Neurosis is always a substitute for human suffering”*. The trouble is that the avoidance of problems usually ends up causing us even more emotional pain than the original problem. It is a sign of maturity that we learn to accept emotional pain in order to achieve a long term benefit but this has to be learnt through practice; we thus have to learn personal responsibility and rigorous self-honesty.

My way:

For most addicts in early recovery, the reality is that doing things ‘my way’ has not worked. It is time to try something different. The thing that stops us doing so is our pride.

This does not mean allowing others to take advantage of you. It simply means that you look realistically at what has happened without sulking when things don’t work out the way you want them to.

“Surrender may be the necessary foundation for recovery but sometimes we fight it. Most of us look back after some clean time and wonder why on earth we fought so hard to deny our powerlessness when surrender is what finally saved our lives.”

(Just for Today, Narcotics Anonymous)

The important thing to remember when working to change such attitudes is that we need to become willing to change – we may not be able to change as quickly as we would like, but the motivation to change needs to exist. It is difficult to achieve lasting change without motivation.

Acceptance means loving oneself

You must allow yourself to see the positive opportunities that are most certainly there and love yourself enough to make the effort to take action. You must acknowledge your mistakes and your weaknesses (for none of us is perfect) and accept yourself for what you are – an imperfect human being who is blessed with the power to change.

Acceptance means handing it over to a Higher Power

The twelve step programme has a strong spiritual dimension. When we are struggling to change, we accept our powerlessness and look to our Higher Power to help us. But this often requires a leap of faith. A part of us, that ego factor, does not want to hand over control to something that is intangible, and fights against this. Yet this is in fact the pivotal moment in our search for acceptance. Today I must give up the struggle over whatever is out of my hands and be grateful for my Higher Power's guidance and for the gift of recovery.

An AA member told me recently:

"I am not religious, but when I look at the universe, I cannot believe that we are all just a random collection of molecules – there must be some Higher Power behind it all. I believe that this power works through other people and that change and help to change, come through other people, through their support their challenges and their example."

Acceptance is an attitude of mind

We live in a joined-up universe and if I want true serenity, then I must hand over my will to this Higher Power of my understanding."

If we do not have a Higher Power in early recovery, we should keep an open mind and continue to search until we identify a source of help that is outside ourselves. We all have a need for inspiration of some kind and those that seek will eventually find, as for example, the 'Educated Agnostic' whose story is told in the AA Big Book, which ends as follows:

"...gradually, in a manner I cannot explain, I began to re-examine the beliefs I had thought beyond criticism. Almost imperceptibly my whole attitude toward life underwent a silent revolution. I lost many worries and gained confidence. I found myself saying and thinking things that a short time ago I would have condemned as platitudes! A belief in the basic spirituality of life has grown and with it belief in a supreme and guiding power for good."

Some people think that acceptance is just something that they have to 'do' once and then everything will be all right. Not so, it is rather a state of mind that we must practise constantly until it becomes part of our very being, as AA co-founder Bill W put it:

"Our very first problem is to accept our present circumstances as they are, ourselves as we are, and the people about us as they are. This is to adopt a realistic humility without which no genuine advance can even begin. Again and again, we shall need to return to that unflattering point of departure."

This is an exercise in acceptance that we can profitably practice every day of our lives."

(As Bill Sees It, pg. 44, Grapevine March 1962)

A pretty good way of adopting this attitude is to say the Serenity Prayer at least once every day.

Recovery never ends, it is a journey for life but it is the most exciting journey that you will ever make. The change that happens on this journey, from a starting point of chaos and despair to peace of mind and happiness, is nothing short of miraculous. In becoming reborn in this manner, one of the most important changes will have been to acquire true acceptance. If we are able to say that we are addicts but that this fact is a blessing (as M Scott Peck said), then we are truly heading in the right direction.

Our lives will have become incalculably better, in ways that are described so movingly in the famous lines of those first AA members who wrote the Big Book – The Promises:

“We are going to know a new freedom and a new happiness. We will not regret the past nor wish to shut the door on it. We will comprehend the word serenity and we will know peace. No matter how far down the scale we have gone, we will see how our experience can benefit others. That feeling of uselessness and self-pity will disappear. We will lose interest in selfish things and gain interest in our fellows. Self-seeking will slip away. Our whole attitude and outlook upon life will change. Fear of people and of economic insecurity will leave us. We will intuitively know how to handle situations which used to baffle us. We will suddenly realize that God is doing for us what we could not do for ourselves.”

(c. 1976 AAWS, Alcoholics Anonymous, pp 83-84)

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