



CASTLE CRAIG
HOSPITAL

Dealing with Resentment

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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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*“A life which
includes deep
resentment leads
only to futility and
unhappiness”.*

*Alcoholics
Anonymous
(2001)*

Dealing with Resentment

Resentments are negative emotions that people experience when they feel that they have been wronged in some way. The feeling may often be irrational, but the person will not be able to see this. Resentments are often a response to what we consider to be an injustice by the actions of a superior – we tend to react differently to the actions of those whom we see as inferior or junior (children, for example).

Holding resentments has been described as similar to carrying a great weight around all the time. By letting go of this negative emotion the individual is able to lighten their load and life becomes a lot easier and more productive.

The most common reasons for resentment include:

- Attempts by others to control our lives,
- Failure of other people to react in a predicted way,
- People who act as if they are superior to the individual,
- People who get in the way of the individual's attempts to satisfy their own needs,
- People who say one thing but do another – hypocrites,
- Superiors who abuse their power,
- When other people behave in a manner that makes us feel diminished and negatively affects our self-esteem,
- People who tell lies,
- When we feel we have been treated unfairly.

In some instances these feelings of resentment will be based on real injustices. In a lot of cases they will have originated almost totally in the mind of the individual who is feeling resentful. Feelings of anger or resentment may also be caused by one's own lack of confidence and assertiveness in handling a situation.

Resentment and substance abuse

Resentment is one of the most common reasons why people abuse substances in the first place. In recovery they need to discover new ways of dealing with the world.

Holding on to resentments can have a devastating effect on the life of anyone whether they be alcoholics or not; we may know people who appear to be consistently angry and have 'a chip on their shoulder' that seems to have become a part of their character. Resentment has a way of becoming ingrained. It is particularly dangerous for those in recovery who are struggling to work on character defects while also dealing with mood swings. The 'Big Book' of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) calls it 'The number one

offender.' Therefore we can see that it is vital that it be dealt with thoroughly.

Responding to negative feelings

'What happens is often outside my control, but how I respond is within my control'.

No one is born angry, resentful or malicious, yet our hearts and minds can easily be filled with strong and persistent negative thoughts and feelings. This change in our character often happens as the result of a perceived wrong. If we don't address and deal with our negative feelings and attitudes, we will begin to harbour resentment and even a desire for revenge. We need to learn the skill of letting go. To do this we must realise that resentment can destroy our integrity, our compassion, and our peace of mind. The skill of letting go is the ability to transform resentment and the impulse for revenge into a search for something better; it is about broadening one's perspective to embrace forgiveness.

Becoming a victim

'If you look at yourself as a victim, it diminishes you as a person'.

A struggling businessman went to great lengths, working long hours, to save his failing company. Finally it seemed like they had turned a corner, new orders started coming in, and he was preparing to pay off some bills. A few weeks later however, he discovered that a trusted employee had fraudulently stolen from the company, and put the company back in jeopardy again. The employee disappeared without a trace.

Such a devastating blow could have put the businessman into 'supervictim' role whereby he acted out his anger and resentments by looking for revenge and people to blame. He could have hired a private detective to track down his former employee, or he could have spent hours at the police station demanding action. He could have returned to the office and blamed the other employees who hadn't noticed the employee's suspicious behaviour.

Instead, he accepted the situation, reported the situation to the fraud squad, dealt with the practical consequences and allowed himself no time for resentment or self-pity; the long hours of work began again but he focused on driving the business forward and solving his problems without blaming anyone else for his predicament.

He had realised that the negative responses of resentment and self-pity would immobilise him and his business and were not going to help him recover the situation. On the other hand, an attitude of acceptance with no desire for personal revenge certainly would help, because by practising these, he could then move on. Today he is successful and happy.

“Do we really want to be rid of our resentments, our anger, our fear? Many of us cling to our fears, doubts, self-loathing or hatred because there is a certain distorted security in familiar pain. It seems safer to embrace what we know than to let go of it for fear of the unknown.”

(Narcotics Anonymous Basic Text - NA Big Book - page 33).

The Basic Text of NA in chapter 4 states that the practice of the spiritual principles of the programme is essential for recovery. These principles include personal honesty, open mindedness and willingness.

Negative attitude

Getting rid of our resentments can mean coming out of our comfort zone and doing things differently. Some addicts can become so used to negativity – blaming others, self-pity and simply playing the victim – that it becomes a very difficult mind-set to change.

The compulsion of resentment

Dwelling on resentment, resurrecting the anger yet again as one remembers the insult can be an intoxicating experience.

Sometimes the memory of a past injustice or an insult can provide a kind of thrill. It can even produce a warm familiar feeling that we may seek out again and again. Indeed, the thought of someone else's bad behaviour can make us feel justified in our sense of indignation, to feel good about ourselves and lead us to say, 'I would never do anything like that'.

This comfortable routine can help us to feel that we are somehow in control of our lives, because we tell ourselves that our behaviour is

justified. The reality however is the same as that for any compulsive behaviour: we are not in control at all. Indeed resentment leads to a decline in personal relationships and isolation from family, friends, colleagues and most importantly, our Higher Power.

To progress in our recovery from addiction and to follow a spiritual programme we need to 'let go' of resentments.

Why do we hold on to resentment?

Some of the most common reasons why people beginning their recovery hold on to resentments are:

- Friends and family do not give credit for the effort being made,
- Friends and family continue to show a lack of trust,
- Other people are trying to interfere in their life,
- Life in recovery is more challenging than they expected. The individual may blame therapists, friends in recovery, or family members for this,
- Others seem to be doing better in recovery. Comparing our achievements with those of others always leads to self-pity,
- The people in their lives do not behave in a manner that they expect.

Emotions

Early recovery is described as an emotional rollercoaster and people tend to experience plenty of negative emotions during this time. It is vital that negativity is not allowed to derail the recovery process – resentment is the emotion that is most likely to do this.

Resentment is a particularly dangerous emotion for people in recovery to experience because:

- By focusing on others we ignore our own behaviour. The only person that the recovering alcoholic or addict can fix is oneself;
- This negative emotion provides no useful purpose and only gets in the way of recovery from our addiction;
- Resentment is a common relapse trigger. Such negativity makes life in recovery uncomfortable, and it often becomes an excuse to return to the use of alcohol or drugs;
- In order to build a successful life in recovery we need to let go of resentments. If they are unable to do this then it will be almost impossible for them to find peace away from alcohol and drugs.
- We cannot change the fact that events or people in our lives have distressed us. It is our own attitude that we must change; we have the power to change this.

How can we let go of resentment?

First of all, we should recognise that letting go of our resentments and accepting what has happened in a positive spirit, is not going to happen in a moment. Certainly we should see these as a long or medium term goal to strive for, but there is work to be done first. Most addicts want to get a quick result because that is what alcohol and drugs offer. However change for those in recovery does not happen like that.

First we must become *willing* to change. This means acquiring a new attitude, a willingness to give up our insistence of holding onto the familiar negativity of our resentment. We need to instead come out of our comfort zone and take action. If you consider change to be a challenge, then you could see the willingness to change as a first step - the moment of accepting that challenge.

Action plan

*‘Do it now, say it now,
don’t be afraid.’*

(Written in her nineties by Scottish painter Wilhelmina Barnes-Graham (1912 - 2004))

Once we have accepted the challenge to change, we need an action plan. For most of us this will mean doing things that we are not used to doing, and this can be scary, but as the saying goes, there is no gain without pain. Once you take that first risk and step out of the comfort zone, you feel the benefit and your self-esteem goes up too. Try using these techniques and remember, letting go of all resentments is the eventual goal – this is not about getting a quick fix:

- Talk and/or write about your feelings of resentment. Make a list of your resentments as the 12 step programme advises:
- ‘In dealing with our resentments, we set them on paper. We listed people, institutions or principles with whom we were angry. We asked ourselves why we were angry.’ (AA Big Book, Chapter 5)

- Discuss these resentments that you have listed with a sponsor or trusted counsellor in an effort to get rid of them.

Ask yourself these questions:

- How have you been hurt?
- Who are you angry with?
- Can you look at this person differently?
- What was your part, if any, in the situation?
- Do this honestly and openly and you may get some surprisingly helpful answers.

Consider the following:

(with quotes from AA Big Book, Chapter 5):

- Try performing an act of kindness, unseen, towards the person you resent.
- *‘This is a sick man, how can I be helpful to him?’*
- Try saying a prayer – for the person you resent, for yourself and for the situation in general.
- *‘God, save me from being angry’*
- Try disciplining your thoughts so as not to entertain this negative attitude.
- *‘We avoid retaliation or argument’*
- Practise being pro-active – ask yourself each day “What can I do today to make change happen, so that I can help myself to shed these resentments?”
- *‘This requires action on our part.’*

Rebuilding relationships

One of the joys of recovery is rebuilding relationships. It is not possible for people to rebuild these relationships successfully if they still hold a lot of resentment.

Emily had known from an early age that her younger sister Millie was her father's favourite. He spoiled Millie and paid little attention to Emily. Millie made the most of her father's preference towards her. Emily resented her, sometimes so much that she would cry tears of rage. She told herself that one day she would get even. The girls grew up and were never close.

Emily found it hard to make friends because she always viewed them as potential rivals. She became isolated and developed a taste for alcohol. By age thirty she was unhappy and drinking heavily, while Millie was happily married.

A year later, Emily was in rehab, working on the 12 steps. She identified resentment as a major block to her recovery and took

responsibility for her feelings. But how? Working with her therapist, she identified forgiveness as a goal, though it was initially hard for her to contemplate forgiving Millie. She came to realise that resentment was harming her alone and that forgiveness could be a huge release – she would be doing herself a favour. She was encouraged to write a letter to Millie explaining her feelings.

Emily never posted the letter, but after leaving rehab, she found herself alone with Millie in the family home. Seizing the moment, she began to talk about her past self-defeating behaviour. Her sister was quick to admit her own part in this and a new relationship was developed that gave both great joy for many years.

Taking responsibility

It is important that we take responsibility for changing our behaviour.

It may be true that in the past, another person has caused us great pain, harm or humiliation through their unacceptable actions or behaviour. But if we continue to hold on to that pain then that is our choice for which we are responsible. Such pain can only continue to make us unhappy and if we allow the other person the power to make this happen, then we are not taking responsibility. In order to do so we may have to overcome our pride and our wounded self-esteem. We can choose not to do this but we do so at our peril if we are in recovery because as the Big Book of AA says, resentments are luxuries that we cannot afford.

Letting go

A final thought – think of some of the resentments that are currently troubling you. Do you hold resentments that have their roots in your lack of assertiveness in dealing with a situation?

I know that I once resented someone who said something highly disrespectful to me in front of a group of people. At the time I did nothing to challenge it because I think I knew deep down that what he said was true, however unpleasant it was. Instead, I preferred to say nothing and to promise myself that one day I would 'get even' (I never did).

If I had been assertive at the time to say something like 'I don't like what you are saying and think that you should apologise', then a difficult situation might well have arisen but at least the matter would have been dealt with there and then. By not doing this, I allowed myself to become a 'victim' and told myself that I was justified in not liking this person. Such a stance prevented me from having any kind of relationship with him

for a long time and it gave me a lot of unhappiness that I did not need to have.

Finally one day, I was able to sort the matter out by means of an honest and open conversation, but my lack of assertiveness and my pride had upset my peace of mind, for a very long time.

Letting go of our resentments, allowing our wounds to heal and practising forgiveness leads us on the path of happiness, peace of mind and emotional and spiritual well being.

It has been said that holding on to anger, resentment and hurt only gives you tense muscles and a sore jaw from clenching your teeth. Give yourself a break!

Letting go and practising forgiveness allows the light back into our lives, leading to a brighter future.

References

Alcoholics Anonymous. (2001). Alcoholics Anonymous, 4th Edition. New York: A.A. World Services.

Narcotics Anonymous Basic Text (2008), 6th Edition, Narcotics Anonymous World Services, Inc.

Checklist for ending resentments:

1. Who or what has made me angry and resentful?
2. How have I been hurt?
3. What is the reality of the situation?
4. How much of a problem is this for me?
5. How am I dealing with these feelings and is there a better way?
6. How does this make me feel?
7. Is there a better way?
8. Who can I talk to about this?
9. Is my goal to help myself by ending this resentment?
10. What steps must I take to achieve this?
11. What strategies can I use to help myself achieve this?
12. What will be the eventual benefits?

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