

## **The Way It Is**

*By Jean Kirkpatrick, Ph.D., WFS Founder*

It has come to my attention recently that some of the beliefs that are abroad about Women for Sobriety are inaccurate. It seems that in some parts of the country I hear that Women for Sobriety is not for abstinence. At least, this is the perception of Women for Sobriety.

Nothing could be further from the truth.

Women for Sobriety stands firmly upon the insistence that its members end their days of drinking and learn how to live a totally new kind of life.

This organization is not for moderate drinking or sometime drinking or even toleration of frequent relapses. Honest and/or occasional relapses may occur, but they are dealt with properly within the group. However, if a woman does not intend to stop drinking or is a constant relapser, then she is not for Women for Sobriety and Women for Sobriety is not for her.

A harsh line? Perhaps, but this is necessary to save the group. No organization, or group of people, can afford having one person constantly and continually disrupting the group and certainly not if that disrupting person is not sincere.

Women for Sobriety, like AA, stands for total abstinence. And like AA, WFS will always have persons who relapse. And, like AA, this is dealt with in relation to the person and that person's attitude.

Women for Sobriety's program is a recovery program. It shows a woman how to stop drinking and then how to change her entire life by changing her way of thinking, her way of perceiving life. It is a program of retraining of the mind; it is a philosophy.

Women for Sobriety is a program of habit breaking and behavior modification through changed thinking. We live in our minds, in our thoughts. If our thoughts are poisonous, so, too, will our actions be. If our thoughts are troubled, our actions are destructive to ourselves.

The Women for Sobriety program is one of positivity, a program of positive imaging. As women, our greatest problem is the lack of a working self-image. We operate from an image given to us by our parents, or one parent, and then we operate from other images provided to us from other persons we are with. Because of this, the Women For Sobriety program shows how to change into a positive way of imaging ourself. Our keynote: "I am a competent, caring, compassionate woman." And we literally think ourselves into this image and act from it.

The Women for Sobriety program is not a simple program. It takes time to grow into it and with it. But it is a growth program. It is sometimes used not properly but it still 'works'. Then it is the group that is providing sobriety and not oneself. Some women come to Women for Sobriety and have no intention of learning about themselves. All they want is instant sobriety. They find that by coming to meetings and staying busy, busy, busy, they can stop drinking... temporarily.

But this is not "sobriety". It is merely not drinking.

The woman who is of serious intent, the woman who wants to change, will find this possible by using the Women for Sobriety recovery and growth program. She can change by learning about her illness and then about how to change her life. She will learn how wrong her perceptions of herself have been. She will learn how to overcome that and how to begin with a new life, with a new self-image, one of her own making. "I am a competent, caring, compassionate woman."

We live in the environment of our mind. Once we recognize that this is where we always live and will live, we can begin to spend time on changing that environment by changing our thoughts and by constantly working at that change. For this reason the Women for Sobriety program asks that each woman arise 15 minutes earlier to have a period of time to herself to put those positive thoughts into the proper environment, her mind. Throughout the day, this positive imaging should be reinforced. Any, or all, of the 13 Acceptance Statements should be said and held onto firmly.

Many women begin with our 12<sup>th</sup> Statement: "I am a competent woman and have much to give life."\* It's a good place to begin. It's a powerful thought to hold constant. Then, when the thought is firmly in place, positive actions come from it. That's the beginning of real sobriety.

And that's what we are all about: a total change of thought and life-style without alcohol. We do not tolerate women who merely want to lessen the pain of their drinking by coming to meetings so that they don't drink as much as before!

Women for Sobriety members give up their drinking and become the competent women they never knew they could be because of poor self-imaging.

When the real woman emerges, drinking is never again thought about or necessary. But the drink must be put aside first before the recovery can begin and before the growth can take place.

\*This Statement has been updated to reflect the current version. ☞ [October 1978]

(This article is from *The Collection of Sobering Thoughts Booklet*, Volume 3 and copyrighted by Women for Sobriety, Inc., PO Box 618, Quakertown, PA 18951.)

#### Comments from Shirley "didit4me":

In this article of Jean's, she relates what we stand for and what we expect from the women and men (for those that might not realize there are MFS groups but they are kept separate from the women's groups) who join our group. She stresses positive living and outlooks. We have to learn about our past, BUT not to dwell on the negatives. Use the past to create a better future.

There are some negative opinions about WFS! "Oh, you're going to the male bashing meeting!" "There is only one way to quit drinking and it's not with WFS, it's with \_\_\_\_\_" "Women for Sobriety, they just sit around and gossip about each other." I have found that these and other comments come from people who know nothing about us. In addition, they do not WANT to know anything about us.

Women have to be serious about their recovery. We have to put ourselves first, learn to love ourselves. We live by what we think, there is this little voice running around in our minds telling us how to react. That is why Jean says it's important to get up 15-20 minutes earlier in the morning to have time to yourself, to read positive statements and plan on putting them to use during the day. This is a good way to develop positive imaging.

We know that WFS stands for a lot more. We believe in total abstinence; we know that some people have more difficulty getting there than others. Personal experience tells me that this is true; I had several starts before I got it right. Sobriety isn't just not drinking; we have to be serious about the changes that are required. I found I had to change some of my friends, actions and activities. I had to learn more about myself, whether I like what I saw or not. But I refuse to beat myself up about it; after all, I am using Statement #5, "**I am what I think**" and Statement #12, "**I am a competent woman and much to give life.**" Moreover, as Jean says, "It's a powerful thought to hold constant." With the positive thought, positive actions will follow. That is the beginning of real sobriety. ☞

#### Comments from Laura "LauraMM77":

I chose to write about ***The Way It Is*** because it is often considered controversial. In this article, Jean makes some harsh pronouncements about who is and isn't welcome in WFS. I remember being personally challenged the first time the moderator of the face-to-face meeting I attended used ***The Way It Is*** as the weekly topic. I had come to WFS without intending to be abstinent; I just wanted to feel better about my drinking. I was enjoying the meetings and admired the women I was getting to know there. Imagine how mortified I was to read Jean's words: "***We do not tolerate women who merely want to lessen the pain of their drinking by coming to meetings so that they don't drink as much as before!***"

How did Jean know?!?

That should have been my cue to slink off and never return to a meeting again.

However, I had never felt unwelcome at WFS and my intentions for being there had never been questioned. For several months, if I was sober at 6pm on Mondays, I had attended the meeting. I was already hooked. I wanted what I saw in the women around me at the meetings. We said "WFS is a buzz kill" once you accept responsibility for your actions, drinking and using are never the same again. I really believed this program could change my life, if I let it. That meant I had to make a real effort to quit for good.

Thankfully, in addition to being my wake-up call, in this article Jean also explained exactly what I needed to do and what to expect on the way. She clearly explains what the WFS Program really is (retraining the mind and behavior modification) and that a program of growth is necessarily challenging. Who can honestly expect to make "a total change of thought and life-style" without significant effort?

I made a commitment to follow the WFS Program exactly as Jean suggested. The requirements are truly minimal: get up early and spend some quality time with myself at the start of each day. Read the statements and keep focused on the positive.

So I did. Some days I stayed sober, some days I didn't; but, each morning I started with the same intention. Eventually I woke up one morning and realized I was done. I had drunk the day before but would not choose to drink again. I could see no reason to ever drink again. My perception had finally shifted past the point of "no turning back". I had accepted. It was a process that took time, but Jean was right, it did happen.

Many women chafe against following rules, they want to substitute and make exceptions. Jean knew that some success is possible even without the fundamental change in self-imaging she considered necessary for true recovery. If however, you truly want a New Life, you owe it to yourself to do the hard things to achieve it. No one else can do it for you. That is truly, ***The Way It Is.*** ☺ [January 2013]

#### Comments from "Nerak":

At first read, it seemed that Jean's writing was a bit dated. Had she known about the developments in brain science in the last 30-40 years since she wrote this article, she might have been more inclusive of the chronically relapsing woman and might not have supposed the only explanation for this would be insincerity. Now, considering more what she is saying, perhaps what she says is not so related to the condition of the relapsing person but, instead, speaks to the integrity of a self-help group like WFS.

Jean is clear: "Women for Sobriety stands firmly upon the insistence that its members end their days of drinking and learn how to live ***a totally new kind of life.***" (Emphasis is mine.) WFS, she goes on to say, is not about moderating nor is it tolerant of the woman who is frequently relapsing.

Jean was aware that some might view this stance as severe, but her idea was that the collectivity comes before the individual. Dr. Kirkpatrick recognized that a woman could be disruptive by her inability to quit drinking, (although I wouldn't characterize frequent relapses as insincere). To her credit, Jean never condemns this woman; she simply states that this particular form of help is not for that woman. Why would that be?

Our program is less about quitting drinking *per se*, than it is about changing your way of life. Not minor changes like quitting drinking, but major changes like really changing the underlying behaviors and thinking that gave rise to the drinking problem in the first place.

Like the women who've written in this series state over and over, echoing the words of Dr. Kirkpatrick herself: "And that's what we are all about: a total change of thought and lifestyle without alcohol."

Those of us who have finally achieved a foothold or even a long walk in solid recovery know very well that there are a lot of things to come to terms with in recovery. We must learn new ways of living and thinking, and deal with the losses and gains of building a New Life. We learn to become successful women and to stop denigrating ourselves. We are exhorted to become competent, to be serious about our lives, to address things with clarity and to not waste our precious lives (and health) with self-harm and complicity with those who would see us fail.

As Jean says: "When the real woman emerges, drinking is never again thought about or necessary. But the drink must be put aside first before the recovery can begin and before the growth can take place."

I started by saying that Jean was perhaps a little dated in her ideas about relapse and abstinence but I'll end by saying that actually, she was incredibly and astoundingly prescient in her philosophy, a genius of a woman and thinker. Jean was not aware of the exploding knowledge that the years after her death would entail in the field of addiction; but, she was aware, perhaps for reasons other than what the science has come to prove, that we can't learn while drinking. You can't be the rat pressing the lever for more dopamine and develop your prefrontal cortex at the same time. That is to say, you can't learn to build a new way of existing while still engaging in the old way of life. This program is about building a new life which is so very much more than stopping drinking or moderating.

For the woman who isn't sure what she wants to do with her drinking or who is perhaps that chronic relapser – please don't despair and think you are a hopeless soul belonging nowhere and deserving only of pity. Not at all, simply be aware that this is a program where you must take your new life seriously and that, sometimes, the complexity of your problem might require more

than a self-help group is able to give. Some women need help that is beyond the scope of a self-help group. This is not a personal reflection on you; it is simply a suggestion that you recognize the objectives of the collectivity. This particular program is meant to help women build a new life more than it is about helping women quit drinking.

A final thought before I post this morning is that the program is a structure. It's meant as a support for building a New Life. Any group has a structure that suggests a spirit of the group and some limitations of the group. And there is the living group – the personalities, spirits, leaders, etc. that make the group and shape the group. A drinking problem rarely exists in isolation. We know today that about half of the women in a treatment program for addiction will have (conservative estimates) other mental health issues: personality disorders, trauma, complex post-traumatic stress, other anxiety disorders, other addictions, depression and so forth. Sometimes these problems can be severe enough to really disturb the balance a living group achieves. Since Jean recognized the importance of having an available support group for women based on an alternative model to what was already available – allowing a person or persons who had insincere agendas to come into the group was something she felt needed to be avoided. I think there are times when women without exception need to consider how they use the group, what their agenda is and if it fits the purpose of our collectivity.

This living breathing group has offered me, personally, the chance to know many remarkable women. I am grateful to Jean Kirkpatrick for this living program that has made all the difference in my life. This series is important because it adds an updated voice of women who are participating in this structure and creating a living program that serves to keep this program relevant today. ☘ [January 2013]

Comments from “Sobrave”:

***“Women for Sobriety stands firmly upon the insistence that its members end their days of drinking and learn how to live a totally new kind of life.”***

Jean Kirkpatrick wrote this article when she became aware of the perception of some that WFS is not for abstinence and wanted to set the record straight. She affirms that *“Women for Sobriety, like AA, stands for total abstinence. And like AA, WFS will always have persons who relapse. And, like AA, this is dealt with in relation to the person and that person’s attitude.”*

Chance put me into the slot to write about this article; which, in some aspects, is very fitting for me, my drinking history and experience, and I will write about those later. First though I want to outline the main points Jean makes in this essay about the WFS Program and what is expected of those who use it.

#### **What is WFS?**

- > a recovery program
- > a program of habit breaking and behaviour modification through changed thinking
- > a philosophy
- > a growth program

#### **What does WFS require us to do?**

- > end our days of drinking
- > learn how to live a totally new life through:
  - = breaking our old habits
  - = developing positive images
  - = changing our thoughts

**How does the WFS Program help us to achieve this?** Through various ways, most importantly the 13 affirmations, it shows us how to:

- > stop drinking
- > change our lives by changing our thinking and our way of perceiving life
- > change into a positive way of imaging ourselves
- > act from this positive image

#### **What’s the catch?**

- > We have to stop drinking, no moderation allowed, no dealing with ‘just the one’.
- > There is no such thing as “instant sobriety”.
- > If we don’t grow into, and with, the program, it still may work in a way, but then the group provides sobriety, and not we ourselves. We can stop drinking for a while by keeping busy, but we are not recovering.
- > We need to be prepared to learn about ourselves, even if this is painful.
- > We need to invest time (and effort) into positive thinking and changing our mind.

## What's the promise?

- > If we work the program, we will in time learn positive ways of perceiving life.
- > We will learn that we are competent, caring and compassionate women we never knew we could be and act from this.
- > When our real self emerges, we don't think any more about drinking or that it may be necessary to cope with life.

## My drinking history

I drank for most of my adult life and knew since my early thirties that it was a problem—not so much the amount I drank but the obsessive thoughts about it. For years I drank more or less every day half a bottle of wine, sometimes a bit more, but never so much that it had a negative influence on my performance in life. But it sure had a negative impact on my emotional well-being. By the time I was 48, drinking had got out of hand and I was looking for help. By chance, I found the phone number of the only WFS group in Australia, which ran several meetings in one city and provided other support. I was living in a remote area so I rang them and, with their support via phone (no internet where I lived), I stopped drinking. I 'worked the program' for one year, then my lifestyle changed and I became very busy.

I moved to the city where the group is located, but didn't join a meeting group straight away as I was too busy. About 18 months later though, I regularly went to a group meeting close to my work place but didn't do much else in relation to working the program. This group eventually was given up as it had lost its meeting place. That happened during an extremely busy time for me, which culminated in a major achievement and the start of a relapse after four years and eight months of sobriety. I didn't even think about relapse when I picked up that first glass to 'celebrate'. I was a classic case of someone not working the program properly—I had been keeping busy and forgot about drinking; but I was not recovering. Jean writes about this, *"It is sometimes used not properly but it still 'works'. Then it is the group that is providing sobriety, not oneself. Some women come to Women for Sobriety and have no intention of learning about themselves. All they want is instant sobriety. They find that by coming to meetings and staying busy, busy, busy, they can stop drinking ... temporarily. But this is not 'sobriety', it is merely not drinking."*

My relapse lasted for just over seven years before I again wanted to do something about my drinking. I found this online group and became sober again. Luckily, I had learned from my previous mistakes and this time took the time and effort to really work the program with the help and support of the women here. As I live again in a remote area, the contact with so many women online is vital for my ongoing learning about, and growing in, recovery. Now, after five years of my new sobriety, I can say that drinking has no role whatsoever in my life any longer. I don't drink and that's the end of the story.

## So what?

Like in so many of her writings, Jean tells us in this article about the way it is—what we need to do to become sober. She has given us the tools; but, it is up to each of us to use them and work with them. She doesn't make empty promises either *"It takes time to grow into [the program] and with it."* If we are willing to change, we can—in time—do this with the help of the program.

From my own experience, I can say how easy it is to fool ourselves. I thought I was safe in my sobriety; but, I didn't realize that recovery is an ongoing commitment and process. I sometimes like to compare this with dealing with a chronic illness we need to manage. Would we suddenly stop taking insulin if we need it to manage our diabetes? Or the pills we have to take for high blood pressure? Or—in my case—the medications I take for arthritis to keep it in remission? I know what not taking them does to me, I had to do that for a while because of other health issues—it was not nice. It's exactly the same with sobriety and recovery. Working the WFS Program is our medication, the tool we have to manage our addiction, which is a chronic illness, to keep it in permanent remission. Without that, we risk a lapse or relapse, even after longer sobriety.

In early sobriety, we can encounter additional problems and Jean addresses some of them in her article. Firstly, we need to really want to stop drinking and make a commitment to sobriety. While relapses can happen, serial relapses (which show a lack of commitment) are not tolerated. Consequently, you can see on the online forum sometimes 'tough' posts for those who relapse. It's our choice to abstain or to relapse—moderation does not work. Again, from my experience, I can say that I felt and still feel a huge relief that moderation is out of the equation—it takes just too much effort! Much easier to abstain and get completely rid of the obsessive thoughts.

Nerak wrote something about chronic relapsers, which I think is very important and I want to paraphrase it here. She says we must take our new life seriously and sometimes the complexity of our problems is such that we need more help than what this group can give us. For me, this means that part of working the WFS Program is to recognize what type of help we may need and to seek it in addition to working the program.

Jean gives us a very simple but effective tip for working the program, which has been mentioned in these article comments several times already. Take 15 minutes in the morning as time for yourself *"to put those positive thoughts into the proper environment, [our] mind. ... Any, or all, of the 13 Acceptance Statements should be said and held onto firmly."* In our early sobriety, this can become our lifeline. Certain statements can become our mantras that guide us through our days as has happened to me. At times I clung for dear life to **"Problems bother me only to the degree I permit them to"** and **"Negative**

**thoughts destroy only myself.”** Over time, the way we work the program and the meaning and use of the statements may change for each of us as we become more aware of who we really are. And that leads me to the last point I want to make about this article—time.

We need to make time for working the program; and it takes time for the program to work in helping us to break our habits and change our thinking to modify our behaviour. We need to make the time to read the statements, think about them, root them firmly in our minds in the morning so that we can recall them over the day when we need them. We need to make time to reflect with others on the program, how it works for us and for them. Without making the time to work the program as it is intended, we can stop drinking, but we are not really sober—we don’t necessarily change our thinking.

Breaking our habits and changing our thinking takes time, a lot of hard work and energy. In other words, we have to be patient with ourselves and the program so that it can work. We need time to sit with our feelings, which will surface; deal with past demons, learn to live in the present, discover who we really are, learn how to be happy and enthusiastic, how to love and be loved, how to care for ourselves. We need time to grow emotionally and spiritually, to become the competent, caring, compassionate woman we are meant to be, who is in charge of her thoughts, mind and feelings. I strongly believe that as we continue to change in our lives and go through the different life stages, this is an ongoing process. Life is constantly throwing challenges at us which, as sober women, we can accept as opportunities for growth. In this way, the Women for Sobriety Program is not only a program to become sober, but also one to help us cope with life’s events and continue to grow. It truly is a philosophy! ☺ [January 2013]