

Getting Back To The Real World

By Jean Kirkpatrick, Ph.D., WFS Founder

So many times when I am speaking about the time when I got sober and started living again, it sounds as if I did this overnight.

Of course, all of you know that our recovery does not happen that quickly. Recovery is almost a lifetime project. Getting sober is just a beginning.

However, there will be times in the beginning when you will know depression, anxiety, and a great sense of failure, even though this is an upbeat time of your life. Part of these feelings come from the alcohol wearing off. Part of the feelings come from our inability to deal with a reality of sobriety.

Sobriety is a period of positive change. Think of it as a time of reward. See it as a period of great forward movement, as a period of positive growth.

This is a period during which you must work toward self-acceptance. If the depression you feel immobilizes you, force yourself into motion, into doing things. Don't sit back and give up. Never permit self-pity in the form of "Why did this have to happen to me?" to get to you, or your sobriety will collapse.

Get on top of life and problems. Take one problem at a time. Know that there is always something you can do about every situation. Never, ever feel helpless and overwhelmed.

In the beginning of our sobriety we will continue to have shifting moods and unpredictable behavior but these two emotional conditions are the ones we will have to spend the most time on correcting, for they have too long been a part of our lives. In actual fact, those women who begin the work of changing their lives after getting sober, stay sober forever. Those women who do not begin to work on emotional growth through changes in personality almost never have a successful sobriety.

It is also a fact of sobriety that sometimes we experience a feeling of failure, which is very strange, considering the fact that we have succeeded in the largest sense of achievement. We have overcome. We are on top of our alcoholism for the first time. So why do we experience a sense of failure? Perhaps because we were so used to depending upon alcohol for everything; perhaps because we felt like failures when we were drinking but simply were not aware of it when soaked in alcohol.

But feeling like a failure is part and parcel of beginning sobriety. Fortunately this can be overcome and rather quickly. It's a matter of training one's mind to new thinking.

This is the period during which the Women for Sobriety "New Life" Program can be a great help, for it is a program of study and meditation. It is a program that shows you a new way of life and directs thinking into avenues for growth.

It is also a positive way of overcoming feelings of failure, depression, self-pity, and anxiety. It is a program that changes negativity into positivity.

It is not always easy to get back into the real world. Persons around us frequently do not understand us during this period and we are usually too quick to respond in anger. This sometimes makes us want to say, "What's the use. Might as well drink. Nobody knows how hard it is for me." The despair of self-pity rules us and we are right back to where we started.

Getting back into the real world means that we have decided to be good to ourselves. We have decided to end feeling terrible, emotionally and physically, and we are doing this for numero uno... doing it for us and no one else.

Getting back into the real world means life... new life. It means revitalization. ☞ [October 1979]

(This article is from *The Collection of Sobering Thoughts Booklet*, Volume 4 and copyrighted by Women for Sobriety, Inc., PO Box 618, Quakertown, PA 18951.)

Comments from Julie (Niagara Falls, NY group):

Another great article written by our founder, Jean Kirkpatrick! I loved how she described early sobriety and the recovery process. I remember my beginning days of sobriety all too well. I think the toughest part for me, which continued to keep me stuck in what seemed like an endless prison sentence, was how Jean described the feelings of depression, anxiety, and sense of failure - even though it was an upbeat time of my life. She stated that part of these feelings comes from the alcohol wearing off, and part comes from our inability to deal with the reality of sobriety. For me, that was so true. I had both parts present. I had been stuffing down my emotions and pain for years with alcohol; and, when I stopped ingesting the poison, my emotions and feelings bubbled up to the surface. I had no idea how or what to do with these feelings at the time and my thoughts of feeling sorry for myself brought me back to the bottle time and time again.

It wasn't until I started doing exactly what Jean suggests in her article that finally I stayed sober. It's about beginning the work on changing your life after getting sober - that is what brings us success in staying sober. The ones who just stop drinking, and don't work on growing emotionally and changing their personality, don't usually make it. I was one of those women she talks about. I got sober. I stopped drinking and that was it. It took all of the strength and energy I had to just make it through a 24-hour period without picking up. I couldn't even fathom working on growing emotionally. My body was going through the physical torture as the alcohol left it. However, as Jean describes, it just isn't enough to keep us sober. I remember someone once saying that stopping drinking is the easy part. Staying 'stopped' is sometimes what takes work.

Once I was feeling better physically, it was the work and using the WFS Program, faithfully, each and every day if only for the 15 minutes in the morning that Jean suggests. That's what has gotten and kept me sober for my almost 5 full years. It is a necessary part of the process and, believe it or not, it's a pretty wonderful part. It's when we begin to know ourselves, and then like ourselves, that we eventually love ourselves. Think of the whole sobriety and recovery process as baking a cake. You can go out to the store and purchase the cake mix (stopping the consumption of alcohol). However, the mix all by itself (sobriety) doesn't exactly make it a cake does it? It needs all the other ingredients, such as eggs, oil, and water (the statements, meditation, and other WFS women to support you) to make it the yummy, savoring cake that it is meant to be... once you take it out of the box. ☞ [September 2011]

Comments from Amy (Niagara Falls, NY group):

I feel that getting back to me was the most important step in my early recovery. I could not run away from myself any longer; I had to face my demons head on. This, of course, did not happen overnight. My first year of sobriety was dealing with the overwhelming emotion of anger. Once I looked beyond the anger, I could see what was underneath the surface. I had to ask myself, "Was I hurt? Disappointed? Frustrated? Agitated? Anxious?" Where did these emotions originate?

I am still uncovering the real emotions. Slowly, but surely, this happens and will continue to happen throughout my recovery. ☞ [September 2011]

Comments from Brandi (Niagara Falls, NY group):

I relate to having anger issues and I get mad with other people who don't understand what I am going through. I sometimes find myself having those feelings of self-pity because I feel like I cannot drink like everyone else. I also agree with the fact that stopping drinking is only the beginning. I need to learn more about how to deal with things that bother me. ☞ [September 2011]

Comments from Lindsay (Niagara Falls, NY group):

I have been experiencing anxiety, depression, and failure and could not understand why this was happening when I was well on the road to recovery. Jean's article hit home. Now that I no longer had the alcohol to cushion my anxieties, I was allowing my feelings to immobilize me. I was feeling sorry for myself and becoming overwhelmed. Reading her words was an "Ah Ha!" moment for me and I immediately went to the Statements and felt better knowing that I am not alone in these experiences.

I am not a failure. I am on a "normal" road to recovery - just like so many other WFS friends. ☞ [September 2011]

Comments from Jeanne (Niagara Falls, NY group):

My anger, depression and self-pity have come from my not dealing with a variety of situations that happened to me as a child. Instead of trying to wrap my mind and thoughts around my circumstances, and attempting to deal with it, I chose to drink for 30 years instead. Thanks to the 13 Statements and the support of my face-to-face group, I have come to terms with some things. When I find that more of those stuffed down feelings come back up, I feel like I have the tools to deal with it. ☞ [September 2011]

Comments from Taresa (Niagara Falls, NY group):

In the first couple of months of my sobriety, I was still in denial that I really had a drinking problem. Then I came to WFS through Julie's group and I have learned that I have a life-long illness, not a problem. I thought I would be able to drink again one day and I even said so at my first meeting. However, I now realize, through WFS and its statements that I can never again drink and I honestly don't want to.

Today, I'm nine months sober and I have learned that life is extremely more fun. My problems don't seem anywhere near as bad as they once were, and my depression is gone! I still have some of the highs and lows, but I'm dealing with my problem.

One of my biggest problems is having belief in my self-worth. With WFS, my family, and friends, I know I will and can achieve this, with positive thinking and some hard work. ☞ [September 2011]

Comments from "CaliMom":

Becoming sober is scary, really, really scary. I knew that it would require huge changes and that scared me because I was used to my life. It was a mess but it was my mess. When I finally accepted that sobriety would save my life, it became a little easier to accept change. Thankfully the changes in sobriety happen slowly, over time, and they simply become our normal.

In the article *Getting Back To The Real World*, Jean tells us to get busy because being complacent will lead to self-pity and a feeling of helplessness. Although we can feel sorry for ourselves every now and again, we cannot stay that way as it is a great inducement to drink. **

One of the first things I tell newcomers is to stay busy. Left to our own devices, we will romanticize the drink and talk ourselves into "just one more". Staying busy keeps us from having those thoughts. If you are knee deep in cleaning closets, painting a room or reading a good book, chances are you aren't thinking of drinking. In early sobriety, I cleaned every closet in my house and attended every online chat that I could. I also read everything on the WFS website and tried to help other newbies. It is hard to feel sorry for yourself when you are helping others.

Jean points out that an overwhelming feeling of failure is common to us at the beginning of our sober journey. I think this is because we look back and mourn time wasted and time lost. Turns out these feelings are also time wasters and need to be banished! WFS is based on positive approaches to an often negative world. So much of our drinking resulted in sad, depressing and guilty thoughts that now need to be turned around.

Staying busy and proactive in the WFS Program guarantees our success in turning around our negative behaviors. If we stay vigilant in taking steps, even baby steps each day, we will be well on our way to sober, new lives. We can do this, together!

**Do remember that there will always be excuses to drink, but none of them good ones. ☞ [January 2013]

Comments from Sue "Exactly45":

Often we talk about the journey of recovery. What we are really referring to is the process of the trip back to the real world from the darkness of the world of active addiction. It is no overnight trip. As Jean reminds us in this article, it will take us a lifetime. She also reminds us to have courage in moving forward, and patience in learning to love ourselves and find positive change.

When I first found Women for Sobriety (WFS), I was already six months clean and sober. That's all I was though, clean and sober. I still had no idea how to put together a life. It would take being here; learning and putting into practice this beautiful program to start to experience life again. Without the growth I have experienced since finding WFS, I have no doubt that I would have used again. The processes of isolation and fear needed for my addiction to take hold again had already begun as I typed my very first online post.

To stay clean and sober, I needed so much more than just not using. I needed the "work of change" that Jean speaks of. I had so much to learn about myself and how to be in the world. I have come to see my sobriety as a dance; circular, weaving, wild, unpredictable, always changing shape and moving, moving, moving. It is my job, in the dance, to have the strength and stamina to keep up, to listen for the beat and to let myself find my rhythm.

When I was active in my addiction, I was flailing my way through life. There was nothing pretty and nothing successful about it. I am learning now though to move with grace and control through each and every day. This daily movement is the real work, the real renewal and revitalization of life that Jean writes about.

In order to dance successfully, I need to learn the choreography, the map of how to fit all the moves together. Positive thinking, happiness, problem solving, confidence, commitment, priorities, fearlessness, enthusiasm, generosity of spirit, self-love and responsibility are the steps I need to practice daily. Each step requires me to act and move from whatever spot I am clinging

to as if it were my last stand. The 13 Statements, and all that I learn by sharing and reading program material, are the tools that teach me to dance; not just well, but magnificently. Without the statements, I inevitably collapse in confusion and exhaustion, fear and failure. I just do not know how to do this dance of life on my own. I never did know.

It was the not knowing how to engage with life that led me to addiction in the first place. Life was too big and too hard for me so I hid in the comfort of addiction, no real thought, no real feelings, no real Susan. Being high, spaced out and caved in was the single easiest way to not live that I ever found. I need the guidance, wisdom and direction of the 13 Statements to be in the real world and to really engage with the fullness, beauty and complexity of the dance of life.

Like many of you, I came to sobriety through crisis, not decision. I was homeless, owned what I could carry in a green garbage bag and I was terrified. I could not move in any direction because I had run out of options. My mantra was, "Please, just let me die" and I meant it. My solutions were simple; overdose after overdose. I shook and cried my way through detox, angry as I had ever been that no one understood. It really took the fog of addiction wearing off for me to see even a glimmer of a chance for life. Even then I wasn't sure I wanted it. It would be months before I would.

I went to outpatient programs, therapy, every little plan, trick and treatment that was offered to me. But everything, my whole world was such a mess, was so entirely upside down. I was sober; but, I sure wasn't living yet and I sure wasn't doing much positive thinking. I didn't even know what positive thinking was or looked like.

Living in a shelter for homeless women with addiction and mental health issues, I was really struggling to just make it through the days. Finally, my oldest daughter and I were able to create a plan where I could live with her while I tried to work out what on earth to do next besides just not use and not drink. It was not long after that decision that I found my way to WFS. If I could offer any kind of incentive for getting through those early days of sobriety and having the patience and hope to build a new life, it would just be to provide the contrast of life in those first six months, to life in these last six months. I had nothing, I was nothing, and I was going nowhere but the morgue and quickly.

Now, I dance the dance of life with joy and hope. On a daily basis I learn that I am a capable, competent, caring, and compassionate woman. And I am willing to believe that. Each of the statements leads me to knowing how to manage the world on its terms not on mine. Mine aren't all that clever and rarely work anyways. The only way I knew to live was to run and hide. I could never run fast enough or hide deep enough; no matter how deeply I dug my holes.

It is different now. I feel the beat of my own heart and it is racing with the excitement of possibility. From the statements, I know who I am. They teach me that I am first and foremost able to dance. I am learning I am capable of meeting a problem head on and solving it. I no longer have to hide from what is difficult and frightening. I can take action in each and every circumstance.

I don't have to solve all the problems in one moment. I can breathe and give myself the time and space and place I need to accomplish what needs to be done. I can ask for help when I need it. The dance is not done as a solitary movement, it moves most beautifully in unison with others. I am learning I am competent, able to manage my thoughts and feelings instead of them managing me. When I feel overwhelmed, I know that I have simply lost my own rhythm and need to sit quietly with myself to hear my own needs clearly again. I know to listen to my own heartbeat and its desires in the first place. I know that my needs matter and, in fact, come first or I can't be whole and available to notice anyone else's.

I am learning to be caring. I know that love is a great gift and that it only begins when first I offer it to myself. I have learned from the 13 Statements that I am responsible for loving myself and for treating myself with dignity and respect. I am learning that I deserve love and that it is ok to be able to look in the mirror and see a woman I admire. From that powerful position, I can reach out to others, building, repairing and creating relationships that are based on what I can give, not what I can take.

I know that others can and do love me.

I am learning compassion. I know I am not perfect and I can forgive my mistakes. I can also forgive others knowing it makes me stronger not weaker to do so. When the people I love don't live up to my expectations, I know that the first place I need to look is to myself; whose feet am I treading on in this great dance of life?

The responsibility for my thoughts and actions lay within me, not outside of me. I know that I am not the center of all that happens and I can sit quietly while others shine. I am confident in my ability to do what needs to be done for others and for myself.

Recovery, renewal, re-engagement with life, dancing well, wildly and with joyful abandon requires time; gentle, easy, loving time. It requires a lifetime. If you are feeling frustrated or awkward in your steps forward in sobriety, know that the answers already exist for you. They exist in the statements and the beautiful program of life found in WFS.

Be patient with yourself. Give yourself time. Be encouraged. Relax and live the statements as Jean laid them out for us; daily, with commitment, with patience, with self-love and with kindness. Getting sober is the beginning; living a new life is the full promise. You will find your way and you will hear the music. When you do, dance! 🎶 [January 2013]