

Sobriety or Recovery?

By Jean Kirkpatrick, Ph.D., WFS Founder

This year the WFS “New Life” Program is 20 years old. That's so hard for me to believe. However, during those 20 years, many women have recovered; have gone on to fulfilling lives.

- **Drinking -- sobriety**
- **Problems of gender -- recovery**

To have a fulfilling life requires 2 stages. The first stage is to overcome drinking. This is a period of sobriety.

It is possible to stop at this stage but it does not produce a fulfilling life. Just being sober has little back up when something drastic happens. The immediate response is to go back to drinking because there is no solid basis for the sobriety. Probably the sobriety is a day-by-day management of life. The sobriety is tenuous. It can be upset by troubling news. Its maintenance is always a sometimes thing.

And what of the “New Life” Program? Maintaining sobriety is merely practicing the First Statement.

Going beyond the First Statement, going beyond just the maintenance of sobriety, is the beginning of your pursuit of a full recovery.

The “New Life” Program differs from many others because it is a comprehensive program; it asks its users to make a total change in life to affect a recovery. It asks for a new way of thinking about life and a way of unlocking the key to individual strengths.

When I laid out the program 20 years ago, I saw it as Thirteen Statements of Recovery, with each Statement dealing with one aspect of recovery. In the early years, when I was making speeches, I began to layout a life plan; to illustrate, I'd discuss the different levels of recovery as I saw them. Gradually I began adding the 13 Statements. Finally, I began to see that all 13 could be laid out in a pattern.

So the two aspects are:

- 1) **Sobriety (Statement #1)**
- 2) **Recovery (Statements #2-13)**

After achieving our sobriety, we should want to begin to work on our recovery. Some few don't want to, being satisfied with sobriety and nothing more.

However, I urge all of you to move into the challenge of recovery. It can be exciting to mold a new person - ourselves - to find the best of ourselves.

So the **First Stage** -- dealing with our alcoholism -- is getting sober. This is Statement #1.

The process of recovery begins with **Stage Two**.

Now we begin to work on ourselves. To begin we must examine our thoughts and our language. We become conscious of the many negative thoughts and actions we have in our life. We notice

that we are very pessimistic in some of our attitudes: “*I know it won’t work,*” or “*I’ll never be able to do that*” or “*My life is a mess and I know I can’t change it.*”

These thoughts must be weeded out of our vocabulary and our life. And we begin to become aware of how much we are reacting (still) to things that happened to us years ago. Guilt trips have been a part of our life. Now, as we begin to see how much this is a part of our negative person, we begin to recognize what we must do in this stage of our recovery.

This is a good time to write down the negative elements you recognize in your life. This helps us to realize what we must change.

Each day, 20 minutes before any family member awakens, is the time to begin these exercises of personal and emotional growth. This stage is probably the most important stage of recovery, because it puts us in touch with ourselves, something we have been avoiding during our drinking periods. Then we were running away from life. Now, in recovery, we must turn all of this around. Because this contrast is so great, that’s why this stage is so important even though difficult.

During this stage: examine your thoughts and your language and begin to abolish the negativism, the guilt feelings, the fear and worry. Know that you can handle all of these feelings because you are stronger than they are. Begin to transfer these negative feelings from your mind onto a piece of paper. You are literally house-cleaning your mind.

This stage will always be. It is a process that should go on for the remainder of your life: checking your thoughts and analyzing them.

Stage Three:

Now that we have recognized our negatives, this is the time to fill our minds with positives. Begin creating positive statements about yourself. Begin with, “I am a competent woman.” Then add many positive statements to this. Each morning, after you have examined your thoughts for the negatives and removed them, then put into their place positive statements about yourself. Make a list of them for yourself but always include, “*I am a competent woman.*”

Stage Four:

Now that you are becoming a positive person, this is a good time to add other elements to your life -- joy and happiness that you are a new person. Feel enthusiasm for each day, knowing that you have discovered a secret of life: we are what we make of ourselves.

Stage Five:

Perhaps feeling and expressing love has been difficult in the past. Perhaps we aren’t even sure we know what love is, but now that we have acquired some good feelings about ourselves, we can begin to think about relationships -- all kinds of relationships now that we feel sure of ourselves to express the love we feel toward others. We will be unafraid to express our true feelings.

Stage Six:

Now is the time to begin to delve deeper into ourselves to experience the growing spirituality we have been feeling.

First we overcame our problem; next we began to understand ourselves; then we turned to relationships and now we are free to deal with our spiritual self. For the first time, we feel in

tune with the universe and not as if we are drifting off into space all alone.

We have come to the fruition of ourselves and we know that each morning we must make the time to renew ourselves to ourselves.

This is the new you in the New Year. ☼ [February 1996]

(This article is from *The Collection of Sobering Thoughts Booklet*, Volume 16 and copyrighted by Women for Sobriety, Inc., PO Box 618, Quakertown, PA 18951.)

Comments from Angela "LeTigre":

In her article, "Sobriety or Recovery", Jean makes a clear delineation between just not drinking and finding "the best of ourselves." Statement 1/Level 1 addresses our drinking, while the remaining Statements/Levels address our emotional needs. Jean also refers to the latter as "problems of gender," which, I think, bears exploring.

The WFS Mission Statements says, in part, **"Our 'New Life' Program acknowledges the very special needs women have in recovery – the need to nurture feelings of self-value and self-worth and the desire to discard feelings of guilt, shame, and humiliation. WFS believes that addiction began to overcome stress, loneliness, frustration or emotional deprivation in daily life – dependence often resulted. Physical, mental, and emotional addiction are overcome with abstinence and the knowledge of self gained through the principles and philosophies of WFS."**

As women, we may not hold exclusive rights to guilt, shame, or humiliation; however, I do think it's fair to say these feelings create a different set of obstacles for us in getting sober. I won't presume to speak for all cultures, but, here in the U.S., women are still struggling with being seen with equality and, often, even respect. As a sociologist, Jean recognized this and also recognized that we didn't need to humble ourselves, or turn ourselves over to something outside of ourselves; but, we needed to build up feelings of worth and claim our competence in meeting our own needs. We needed empowerment and that's exactly what this program is designed for.

In many ways, the structure of the Levels is quite similar to [Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs](http://psychology.wikia.com/wiki/Maslow%27s_hierarchy_of_needs) http://psychology.wikia.com/wiki/Maslow%27s_hierarchy_of_needs. Take a minute to review his pyramid. Done? Great! Like Maslow's pyramid, the Levels also build on each other. We must start with a foundation of sobriety and then we can begin to move up. Without that solid foundation to build on, we'd likely not be very successful. If we look at Maslow's pyramid, how can we devote our time and energy to meeting our higher needs if we don't even have our basic needs met? The need for food and shelter will always be of greater importance than our need for self-actualization. We must have a self to actualize! It's the same with sobriety and recovery. How can we focus on emotional and spiritual growth when we are regularly fighting hangovers, at best, or, literally, fighting for our life? We can't and also we won't. We just won't.

While there are a few, the biggest difference that I can see in the progression of need fulfillment between Maslow's theory and Jean's Levels is where the need for self-esteem comes in. Maslow placed that after feelings of love and belonging while Jean felt that esteem comes first. I tend to agree with Jean and I think this is one of those "problems of gender."

From our earliest age, many of us were taught to be caregivers, to be a mommy to our dolls, etc. Others of us were placed in the parent role at a very young age due to parents who were unwilling or unable to fulfill that role. As a result, many women feel that their entire worth is dependent on meeting the needs of others before we meet our own needs. To consider doing it differently feels selfish and unacceptable. And, yet, doing it the way we were raised to left us with a life-threatening drinking problem! Something has to give!

And that is why Statement 1/Level 1 is mandatory for living a New Life. We cannot possibly expect to be able to address all the underlying issues that led to our drinking problem if we continue to drink. It just won't work. And, on the flip side, just not drinking won't address our underlying issues either. We simply cannot have one without the other. As the Mission Statement says, "Physical, mental, and emotional addiction are overcome with **abstinence and the knowledge of self** gained through the principles and philosophies of WFS." (Emphasis is mine.) Both are required.

In "Sobriety or Recovery", Jean details how she sees the progression from sobriety into the increasing levels of recovery, although she calls them "stages" here. She explains how Stage 2, or what we now refer to as Level 2, is the time for us to "examine your thoughts and your language and begin to abolish the negativism, the guilt feelings, the fear, and the worry. **Know that you can handle all of these feelings because you are stronger than they are.**" (Emphasis is mine, again.)

I think that sentence is vital! If we are not willing to believe ourselves strong enough to handle the feelings that come up from a conscious examination of our thoughts and language, why would we move any further in our recovery? We might go through the motions of recovery, but we will not truly find the benefits of it if we are not willing to examine and then rid ourselves of destructive thoughts.

Jean notes, "This stage will always be. It's a process that should go on for the remainder of your life: checking your thoughts and analyzing them."

What an important point! More so than removing negativity as an end goal, this Level teaches us a life-long skill for us to use so that those old issues that contributed to our drinking- the guilt, shame and humiliation, the lack of self-worth- will never again lead us to drink. We are changing our skill set for overcoming difficult feelings and will have no need for our old one.

I am purposely stopping at Level 2 for this series contribution as I feel like the first two Levels are the most important. The rest simply cannot exist without them; therefore, more emphasis must be placed on them. Please don't mistake this decision as commentary on the importance of the remaining four Levels! Each and every one of them is extremely important to a fulfilling recovery! I would encourage each of you to use the skills you develop in Level 2, those of checking and analyzing your thoughts, to think more deeply about the remaining Levels and what they mean to you, why you think they are important to your recovery, and how you can find success with them.

Lastly, I would encourage you to consider what Jean says about only focusing on one's sobriety creating nothing more for us to fall back on when life brings us new challenges and how, "Probably the sobriety is a day-by-day management of life." Consider again this idea of a pyramid. Imagine that each day of sobriety is an individual brick. ***If sobriety is the foundation, and every day is lived with a focus on just that day, how would we build our pyramid? What would we have but an increasing amount of bricks that lie on the same level as all the others? How will you reach your highest self if you're only living on the lowest level?***

I encourage each of you take a wider view of recovery rather than a day-by-day maintenance of your sobriety for, as Jean says, this is the way to unlock our individual strengths. We need not be plagued by these problems of gender; but, rather we can embrace Statement #12 as an important, individual woman. Statement #12, ***"I am a competent woman with much to give life."*** *This is what I am, and I shall know it always.*

Believe and achieve. 🌸 [January 2013]

Comments from "Megg":

As I've read through Jean's articles, and the comments that comprise our study of her thoughts, I am struck by two persistent themes: this work of ours, this "New Life" Program, is a work-in-progress. WE are works-in-Progress. To *Tooz*, the program is a yellow brick road, to *LeTigre*, a pyramid. The readings suggested to me an advert for the U.S. Army of several years ago: "Be all that you can be." Sobering up, and then continuing our study of self and how we can live the best sober lives we can live, *is* being all that we can be.

For me, the beauty of this program is that it is so *sensible*. Get past Statement #1 (but NEVER forget it), and the rest is almost what my nieces would call "Duh." Paying attention to our thought processes, keeping our self-talk positive, accepting and enjoying happiness, allowing ourselves to love, and growing our spiritual selves, are natural out-growths of the time, energy, inclination, and commitment that we needed to achieve our initial sobriety. In her essay "Sobriety or Recovery?" which she wrote on the 20th anniversary of the program, Dr. Kirkpatrick categorized these efforts as the stages of growth. In her essay yesterday, Angela (*LeTigre*) made the striking analogy to Maslow's pyramid, reminding us that we need to answer our most basic needs (food/ shelter/ sobriety) and then pay attention to our higher selves.

I love her analogy, and I admit the progression needed to advance to a deeper spirituality. But, I'd also like to suggest that once we allow the program to become second nature (my friend *Tank Girl* knows the entire pamphlet by heart (sic!)), these wonderful efforts will seep into every part of our personality and all parts of our lives. My image is rather organic: I picture the attitudes we've introduced into our lives through our acceptance of the "New Life" Program acting like the nutrients provided by the soil, food, water, and light that work together to achieve a strong healthy – need I add – *gorgeous* flowering plant.

Having accepted Statement #1 (and NEVER forgetting it!), I actualize the rest of the Statements and Stages every day, all day. I agree with Dr. Kirkpatrick that "It can be exciting to mold a new person – ourselves." She continues to say that "When we move into the challenge of recovery . . . we find the "best of ourselves." Acting on Dr. Jean's Stage 3, I enjoy the challenge of finding something positive in all situations. (Although Dr. Jean mentions that we do not need to become "Pollyannas," I have no problem playing that "glad game," even if only in my head!) But finding something positive is not an end in itself: when we are positive about a situation, we can extend that positivity to ourselves. Dr. Jean reminds us to give ourselves positive reinforcement through self-statements. Telling myself, "I, Margaret Rose, am a loving sister," helps me to be one. (I tend to do my affirmations when I'm walking or swimming laps . . . the repetitious physical motions lend themselves to repetitious mental motions.)

If we act on Dr. Jean's suggestions in Stage 3, Stage 4 follows naturally (if not effortlessly). In Stage 4, Dr. Jean urges us to "add other elements . . . joy and happiness" about the new persons we've become. She suggests that we "Feel enthusiasm for each day, discover [ing] the secret of life: we are what make of ourselves." If we get this far, we'll also *love* and *enjoy* that self.

Let's be all that we can be . . . together. 🌸 [January 2013]

Comments from "ZadaKate":

This article was written when WFS was 20 years old, and I see it as a kind of summary of the Levels of Recovery. Jean doesn't go into the details of which statements work with each Stage, but the general structure is here. Like many of us, when I came to WFS I started reading the statements every day, along with everything else that caught my eye on the message boards.

It was a little while before I came across the Levels of Recovery; the progression made a lot of sense to me, and helped me organize my thoughts, and I began to think of my recovery in those terms. This article feels like a letter from a friend.

Angela and Megg have already had some very enlightening things to say, so I hope you will bear with me, because I took a personal approach, looking back at some of my own recovery experiences. Maybe my sharing a few things that worked (and still work) for me will help inspire someone else. I was a few days sober when I joined WFS in 2009, so I will skip directly to "Recovery."

STAGE 2: "Now we begin to work on ourselves." Jean tells us to examine our thoughts and feelings, the language we use, the negativity, the fear, the guilt, the worry. She recommends that we begin to write it all down. I think when we write things down it will help us start the process of externalizing our negative thoughts. I found that getting my internal dialogue out into the open, writing the words, made things less powerful than the whispering and sneering voices I heard in my mind! I used a tool I learned in *The Artists Way* called "morning pages" to write something every day. It's basically a brain drain - you write three pages of whatever you feel like writing, even if you whine, or end up writing "I don't feel like writing!" The real point of the process is not what you write, but that *you show up for yourself every day*, just as Jean tells us we need to. Still, things do come up when you sit down and write every day. Themes emerge. Negative self-talk is rampant. And, so, a lot of material arises to examine in the way Jean advises. I learned what some of my negative core beliefs were and it was a real eye opener. I heard not only my own voice, but my parents, teachers, society, etc. And I learned something really important. Those feelings, those negative beliefs, they aren't the truth about me. They are not facts! My big AH-HA moment was when I realized that just because I think something about myself or any situation, *that doesn't mean it's true*. That seems so obvious to me now. But by writing, I found a kind of freedom from my own self-talk that I had never experienced before. It permanently changed my perspective. And it is ongoing. As Jean tells us "This stage will always be. It is a process that should go on for the remainder of your life: checking your thoughts and analyzing them."

STAGE 3: If you are already sober, you are experiencing the power of your strength and conviction in the face of a difficult challenge. It follows that you have the power to make other life-affirming choices. Affirmations! Jean gifts us with 13 powerfully affirming statements to work with. Here she says to begin with "I am a competent woman." I love that! Competence was not even on my radar screen before I came to WFS. (Unattainable perfection? Sure.) Affirmations were something I had heard about but didn't use. So I spent time pulling my negative thoughts out of my morning pages and re-wording them into personal positives. I wrote them down, collected them, even spoke them out loud to the mirror (awkward, but - useful) As a result, I've learned the power of affirmations for keeping self-doubt at bay, for re-wiring my negative thoughts and re-directing the self-hatred that had become so ingrained I hardly knew it was there. I'm a believer!

*"Affirmations are a powerful antidote for self-hatred, which commonly appears under the mask of self-doubt...
Early in recovery, self-doubt can lead us into self-sabotage." from The Artist's Way*

Another self-affirming choice: walking. In my earliest sobriety, I would walk and walk and walk. I walked though my evening "witching hour" every day for months. I listened to recordings of women I admired. I love Pema Chodron, a Buddhist nun, explaining in her friendly voice how to *pause* between experiencing an emotion and reacting to it. Learning how to be less reactive has been a blessing. Just because I think about wanting a drink, it doesn't mean I need to act on it. (Or to put it the WFS way - these are urges, not commands!) Marianne Williamson's *The Age of Miracles: Embracing the New Midlife* gave me hope for my own New Life. I made a playlist of upbeat songs with a positive message and I walked with a dance in my heart. Sometimes I walked and cried. I felt myself getting stronger, mentally and physically, and I felt more confident. With dedication to positive action, I learned that *I could trust myself* to do the right thing, and that led me, and still leads me, to feelings of happiness and joy

STAGE 4: Yay! I am here! Me, the former cynical-skeptical-doubter has developed a positive outlook in life. I rarely cry when I walk anymore. Instead, I look around me and I find so much beauty in the sky and trees and the weather. I got interested in photography and find joy in taking pictures of things that invite my eye, simple things. It isn't that I'm never fearful or doubtful, that would be impossible. We all know that life is often difficult, and sad. But I'm able to see the bright side as well as the dark, and I can actively choose to walk where the light is. And my positive attitude is often contagious, taking me to:

STAGE 5: Love and relationships. I feel that my relationships are changing as I live the statements over time - there is definitely much less family drama and more love expressed. There is still much room for growth in friendship and work relationships. Work in progress!

STAGE 6: Emotional and spiritual growth is evolving for me through yoga and creative pursuits. I feel more connected to the world. I'm looking ahead and, when I choose to look back, it is with understanding and compassion rather than regret and recrimination. All of this has occurred, and will continue, because of WFS and the spark it has ignited in my life.

"Growth, or change, is the key to recovery. It really means an exploration of ourselves. It is a learning process of who we are and what we need to change. The object of our living is to find the best of ourselves and, when we do that, we experience emotional growth. Spiritual growth means our acknowledgment that we are part of a larger whole. Our spirit is that part of us that is not physical. It is the indescribable something else within us. Spirit is the core within. It is the stem of our clock." -Jean Kirkpatrick

The WFS Program has changed my life in so very many ways, and the friends that I've made here, on the message boards and in person, are some of the most inspiring people I know. I wish Jean's brilliance was available to every woman who struggles with addiction. We are the lucky ones - she has given us the tools we need to become our best selves, and all we have to do is show up and do the work. Nothing could be more worthwhile! 🌸 [January 2013]