

Wanting To Belong

By Jean Kirkpatrick, Ph.D., WFS Founder

There are always certain periods in our lives when the going gets rough. Any one of us can think of five or six periods when everything just looked black, when we saw no way out, when we thought life would never again be all right.

However, it is true that time does have a curative factor that eventually we do feel better and, again, we have a zest for life and activity. Sometimes we don't even know how this happens. We only know that we feel less pain and that we again want to do things, want to be involved.

One of these black periods is the time after the first glow of sobriety and health and the period when we are really on the road to recovery.

This is a dark period because we are so completely confused. We feel not exactly like a full-time sober person, nor are we drinking any longer. We really don't know exactly where we fit. In the first days, first weeks of sobriety, we actually glowed. We began to feel great and we looked different physically. There was a spark of health and a feeling of being able to take on the world. We just felt like we would burst from these new feelings and we knew they would never end, that sobriety was now ours forever, and we would begin to think about dedicating our lives to helping other alcoholics. We began to consider being an alcoholism counselor!

We couldn't imagine why we hadn't stopped drinking before. It was so easy.

And then, all of a sudden, it's not so easy anymore. We begin to feel restless and we begin to feel out of place. No longer do we feel comfortable when we are with our new alcoholic friends. There are times when we wish we weren't in this situation. We want to turn back, call the whole thing off. We don't belong. We begin to feel out of place everywhere, even with our old friends and certainly with our new friends.

We don't seem to belong anywhere. We don't fit in.

This period of time is one of the dark periods of which I spoke earlier. It is a period of time when we are in no-man's land. We don't have any real idea of who we are. We feel restless and without mooring. And, even worse, we don't know how to describe it or express it. At times, we are even afraid of admitting it to ourselves.

But how can we help ourselves through this period? What can we do to combat these feelings of not belonging in any group or anywhere?

There are several things we can do that are helpful:

- 1) Stay with our new friends, because we will again feel comfortable in their presence. Even though our first glow may be dimmed, or even gone, we will again like being with them. We should try to spend far more time with our new friends than with our old friends during this period, for our new friends understand alcoholism and what we are going through. Very often our old friends don't and we are put on the defensive and then become resentful.
- 2) We should read, read, read. Not just anything, but we should read about other alcoholics and how they overcame. We should also consider using cassette tapes to help us through this period. Most important is to keep our minds occupied with positive thoughts about getting better and staying that way.

- 3) We must keep in mind that this is a phase and that these tearing feelings we are having will go away.
- 4) Most important is to keep our minds filled with positive thoughts. We must keep working at changing negative thoughts with positive ones. This may be the most difficult part of getting through this period.

This is probably the most difficult period of our recovery. It is far more difficult than those first weeks, because then we began to feel better bodily and that changed our entire outlook on life. It made us feel positive and it made us feel that we were once again in charge of ourselves. Little did we think we would experience this “down” period, even though we were told it might happen.

Getting through this period is often the key to a lifetime of sobriety. This is the period when we begin to realize the enormity of our disease and what is involved in managing it. We begin to see the long haul and we have doubts and questions and a nagging wish we could change all of it. We even begin to think we made a big mistake. We weren't really as sick as we thought we were.

These are the kind of thoughts we must overcome and it can be done by following the four suggestions above mentioned.

Perhaps it can help us to know that this is the most difficult period, that just because the first few weeks were a piece of cake, we are still a long way from recovery, but it can be within our grasp by our application of a few suggestions.

As the months go by, we will find our place and we will no longer wonder where we belong. We will no longer feel like an outsider who made a wrong decision. We will begin to feel at peace with our decision and our new way of life. The sense of belonging helps to ease us through this dark period.

For each of us, this period varies in length of time. How long it lasts can be controlled by us by the amount of effort we put into remaining positive as much of the time as we can. We can control its length by using every means available to us to keep us from turning back into the abyss of the dark days of drinking.

We can shorten this period and we can know we belong with our new friends who give us the support and encouragement we need. ☞ [June 1985]

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Comments from Irene Q-B:

I like this article because I speak over and over to all members that come in range of my voice to do the one very important and helpful thing that each of us must do. Jean states, “How can we help ourselves? What can we do...” Now that we begin to value what the “New Life” Program can do to direct us away from dark moments and free ourselves from cobweb blues, we begin to feel a new spirit. Jean emphasizes in this article that reading will further our new thinking just by saying, “read, read, read” and that, “This is probably the most difficult period of recovery.” I agree. And, now that I'm some years down the road to sobriety, I still read to do more new habits for my new life.

I'll not ever be too old to learn from reading – especially Jean's writings, which I treasure dearly and I'll be 84 in this 2004-year. ☞

Comments from Renee “bassafranklin”:

It is human nature to want to belong. From the time that we're kids, wanting to belong in the same room as the adults or wanting to belong to the right clique, through our adult years when we seek out relationships and groups to give us that

“belonging” feeling. But, as Jean mentions in her excellent article “Wanting to Belong”, sobriety and recovery bring about a whole new desire to belong. And it’s not as easy as sitting in with the adults or getting invited to the popular table at lunch. It can be a dark time in our recovery. But, like Jean writes, there is a light at the end of the tunnel. It just takes getting to it.

While I experienced this “wanting to belong” early on in my recovery some 12 years ago, I had to go through it yet again recently. Two years ago my life was blown to bits and my belief in humanity was severely shaken and tested. It didn’t come about through a loss of sobriety but rather through the loss of my marriage, some friends and me. And much like the crash that we experience through a loss of drinking, I felt that crash through a loss of all that I held dear. And it shook me to my core. Everything that I thought was turned upside down and I didn’t know who I was anymore. I was lost.

Even though I still had the majority of my support system in place (friends, family) as well as the WFS family, I still felt lost. I didn’t know what I was supposed to do. Much like a drunk who discovers sobriety and realizes that they’re a stranger in a strange land, I was right back there again. Thankfully, I remembered a dear old friend who was actually my therapist back in my early recovery days as well as around when my mother passed away. After I lost my mom, she had told me that it was ok to “take it back to the beginning.” Basically, go back to the start and begin anew. It worked then, I wondered if it would work now? My world was spinning out of control, up was down and left was right, and hearing people say, “Don’t worry, it will be ok” wasn’t doing the trick. So, I took it back to the beginning.

I went back to going to WFS meetings, but this time as a member not as a moderator. I found a couple of confidants who listened to me without trying to interject their 2 cents worth of philosophy. I had feelings of anger, betrayal, loss and self-pity. But I stayed with my WFS friends and got plugged in as much as possible to the program. WFS saved my life again... first, with my fight for sobriety, and this time with my fight through this major change and emerge as a new person.

Not to say that it wasn’t tough, it most certainly was. All of the steps that we go through in getting sober, I was reliving. And there were times when I told myself that it was never going to get better. That life was over. But I stuck with it, I reached out, and I began to talk about it and read about it. My feelings of betrayal, embarrassment and loss of trust were still there; but, I was working towards recovery. Burying what I was feeling was not the solution.

Time has a way of changing things. This period was longer than I wanted. I am feeling better. I am feeling stronger and I am grateful I “stuck with it.” I am starting to get involved again in the things that I love. My place in the world is becoming clearer with each day. I guess the hardest part is waiting the time. All I can say is this is the time our faith has to play a key role. Our faith really gets challenged. And it’s our support that gets us through it. It’s our support that helps us figure out where we now belong. Using the tools that surround us, accepting the help that is there, it’s all integrated into our successful recovery.

The last 2 years have really been rough for me. I think I’m at the tail end of it thank goodness! But I didn’t get here by myself. As long as I keep that in mind, I can see the light that is at the end of this dark tunnel. And, for once, it’s not a train coming at me!

I found this poem on the internet. I put it on my refrigerator so I would read it every day and it helped a lot. It’s still on my refrigerator:

The Knots Prayer

Dear God,

Please untie all the knots that are in my mind, my heart and my life.

Remove the have nots, the can nots and the do nots that I have in my mind.

Erase the will nots, may nots, might nots that may find a home in my heart.

Release me from the could nots, would nots and should nots that obstruct my life.

And most of all, Dear God, I ask that you remove from my mind, my heart and my life, all of the “am nots” that I have allowed to hold me back, especially the thought that I am not good enough. **Amen** ☞ [April 2012]

Comments from Deb “dask”:

Having recently come out of one of those dark periods that Jean speaks of, I can certainly relate. And I don’t have much to add to what she has said except to share my personal experience.

I agree with Jean that the beginning of our sobriety and recovery journey is so much simpler (than the dark periods) in comparison. We decide to quit and even though that prospect is scary, it is also filled with wonder and excitement and the joy of a new life looming! There is usually support and encouragement and our bodies feel so much better with the alcohol and substances gone. We are sleeping and eating healthier, exercising, and all around feeling better! At least this was the case with me.

And then life settles in. I remember my brother saying to me after about a year of sobriety when I complained about feeling lousy and not getting the support I expected from my family, “Why should we celebrate something you never should have been doing in the first place?” Ouch.

In my 12 plus years of recovery and I’ve had many peaks and valleys. Such is the nature of life. I’ve lost jobs, gotten sick, watched loved ones die, lost friends, and a host of other difficult circumstances. I’ve been lost in self-pity and have considered drinking. Mostly romanticizing it, until I “think the drink all the way through” and realized that type of thinking is just a fantasy and a one way ticket back to my old life of lies, hangovers and illness.

As Jean says, we need to remember these times are part of life and are temporary. We will feel better again, even if it feels we will not. And it is in these times that we need to dig deep into our toolbox. Connect or reconnect with your sober sisters and those that support your sober lifestyle. Read, read, and read, as she says. Knowledge is power and can be very validating. We are not alone! Talk about your feelings. Ask for help. Seek out like-minded individuals. Eat healthy. Exercise. Get enough sleep. Journal. Take a bath. Get out in nature. Do things you love, even if you don't want to and especially if you don't want to. And don't drink!!!! Ever!!!!

Learn how to sit with your uncomfortable feelings. It's the only way to integrate them. The way out is through. You CAN do it! Onward! ☘ [April 2012]

Comments from "jocie":

Jean's essay, "Wanting to Belong", explores the feeling most of us had after the first glow of early sobriety . . . the feeling of not fitting in anywhere, or as she puts it, being in "no-man's land." That was especially acute for me, since I had experienced a feeling of not belonging from early childhood. As an adopted child, I was never certain of who I was or who I was supposed to be. Belonging would be an issue that would plague me for many years.

I came to WFS after years of soul-searching about my relationship with alcohol. I had known for some time that it was a negative in my life; but, I also felt, as most of us did, that it was also an essential ingredient to simply feeling OK about myself. Alcohol gave me that feeling of belonging after all those years of searching. But having to accept that this feeling of belonging was drug-induced, it had to go. The drinking was not working.

WFS gave me a place to vent and to question and to find people like me. Did I finally belong somewhere? Then came the doubts. Was I truly as bad as others? I heard some of the horror stories and thought, I never wrecked a car, got a DUI or woke up somewhere strange? I never reached their rock bottom? Am I really like these others? Do I even belong here?

Over time, I realized I did, that this is not a contest, but a place to admit the unhealthy hold alcohol had on our lives and to build new lives without it. That is what Jean addresses in this essay, the gloom that hits many of us when we realize that our commitment to sobriety needs to be a lifetime vow.

We no longer fit where we once were, in the drinking world. But we still don't fit comfortably in the sober world either. We are like a person standing on a bridge in a storm, buffeted by emotional winds, pursued by something bad but unsure what waits for us on the other side. This, Jean says, can be the most difficult period of our lives to date.

Why? I believe it is the fear we all have of change. Alcohol used to be our best friend, even if we knew it was killing us. Now who is our friend? The women in WFS? Hopefully, yes. But no one can comfortably jettison a lifelong friend and step into the unknown without fear. Change is always frightening. For some of us, we even fear losing who we were and becoming . . . what? Someone who belongs nowhere.

As Jean suggests, this transition from one life to another is scary. It can feel like being uprooted and dropped somewhere new. But as she also says, if we keep the focus on the new, while remembering the bad things represented by the old, we will find ourselves belonging more and more as time passes. That has been my experience. Those first few months I wondered if I would fit here. Then I realized I did, but it was still hard to immerse myself fully in this new way of living and thinking. So I reached out to people I felt most comfortable with, and they assured me I did belong.

Today I have a new life. I have friends and family that support me and I have this wonderful place called WFS where I am understood. My life still has its moments and that will never change; but, I know I do, finally belong. In life we never stand still. We either go backwards or forward. Jean's essay tells us that belonging lies ahead, not behind, if we have the courage to take those steps. ☘ [February 2013]

Comments from "KMac":

When I first volunteered to write about one of Jean's articles, I looked at the list of available topics to see which one resonated most. It took me about a second and a half to seize on "Wanting To Belong."

I've struggled with this concept so much. My best friend of over 40 years drinks – I can't turn my back on that friendship! My husband drinks. Many of my family members drink (and only a few of them do it to excess – may they find their own paths to recovery sooner rather than later). How can I "fit in" with this group of people now that I don't participate in one of their activities? Now that I'm "different". Now that I've owned the word "alcoholic".

For me, the answer has been simple (but not, of course, easy!): I take time to be away from my old friends when I need to, and no one has minded, because I've explained my reason to them in a non-threatening, matter-of-fact way. They've learned I'm not going to be a "sobriety evangelist" or the "booze police". Their sobriety is their own business – and I trust them not to compromise mine. But then, I've been lucky in that regard. Our family's gene pool is littered with alcoholism, and I do have a few sober relatives, so there hasn't been any real push-back. Mostly, I don't get invited to Girls' Night Out anymore. That's a little bit sad, but I've replaced it with coffee dates and long lunches to catch up. Who knows what else I'll replace it with in the future? Kickboxing? Dog-walking? The sky's the limit!

Jean's article does a really good job of describing the netherworld between early sobriety and long-term life in recovery. In early sobriety (those heady first days and weeks), we're filled to the brim with a sense of accomplishment as we start flexing our

sober muscles. The first few days we wake up with no hangover? Bliss. The new hobbies we take up, the new things we can do in the evenings now that we're sober enough to remember them? Revelations.

I was so proud of myself when I first started. Just getting through each day and not drinking seemed like cause for celebration – it didn't matter that I didn't have a job, it didn't matter that I hadn't exercised that day, it didn't matter that I hadn't checked off half the items on my to-do list. I was *sober*, for the first time in ages, and that was a huge achievement all by itself. At one week, one month, 90 days, the applause rang in my ears.

Then one day, it stopped.

Those around me just assumed I was sober now. They no longer viewed me as struggling to achieve something. They figured I *had* achieved it, so let's all move along – nothing to see here.

This is where Jean's advice comes in. She advises following 4 steps to get through this "one foot in the old world, one foot in the new" period. The first is to **spend a lot of time with NEW friends. SOBER friends. Friends who GET IT**, who understand that it's still a battle even when the first skirmish seems to be won. **Jean doesn't suggest getting rid of our old friends.** After all, how could we? I'm 49 years old, married, with a large extended family and a small group of friends. And, as I mentioned, most of them drink ... normally, though... and that's the key. Most of them can drink normally. I can't anymore. I've acknowledged it, and I'm dealing with it. So I **interact with those old friends and family members in a new way**. I set my own boundaries according to what makes me comfortable (for example, our house no longer has any wine in it, but we have plenty of the whiskey and beer my husband likes – and I conveniently hate). Every alcoholic's set of rules and comfort level is different. (I draw the line at Bailey's Irish Cream – my husband's not allowed to even *think* about drinking that around me!)

I've found my new friends through WFS and through the Outpatient Program I attend. I'm on the WFS message boards almost daily, and I attend my OP twice a week. In both settings, I was amazed at how quickly I felt at home. On the surface, I had little in common with my fellow OPers when I first started – many of them were half my age and addicted to heroin or "oxys" or things I'd never even heard of, with alcoholism more a "side dish" to their main addiction. But I learned pretty quickly that addiction doesn't discriminate. It doesn't care how old you are, what gender you are, what substance you're abusing. We all – addicts, alcoholics, both – have to stare down triggers, negotiate the choppy waters of cravings and withdrawal, find a way to nurture and protect our sobriety, and (for some of us, myself included) claw our way back from relapses. *We understand*. Every time I go to an OP session, it's like wrapping myself up in a warm quilt. I've never once felt out of place, and I've learned so much from my fellow alcoholic/addicts. I don't know if they even realize how profoundly grateful I am to them.

It's the same here, online. Spending time on WFS, in AA meetings for those who choose to attend them, in inpatient programs (for those who go that route) or outpatient programs, in therapy groups, talking with sponsors – all of those things help us get from "here" (new sobriety) to "there" (long-term recovery) with less discomfort.

Statements To Use:

#1 – "I have a life-threatening problem that once had me."

#9 – "The past is gone forever."

Jean's second piece of advice is to read – specifically, to read recovery literature. The importance of this can't be overstated. As we transition from early sobriety to lifelong healing, it's vital that we remember that **recovery is our primary job**. We need to work at it. Think of it like learning to play the piano (which I don't know how to do, so I'm kind of making this up, but humor me ☺). At first, you practice your scales. Necessary, and kind of boring, but kind of exciting too – this instrument that was a stranger to you is becoming familiar. The white keys, the black keys, the octaves... it's like you're learning a secret language. Soon, you're playing "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star" in front of a smiling, clapping audience. But in order to become *really good* at playing the piano, you need to practice it every single day. No one is around to applaud at these practices.

But skip a few, and you'll feel the rust soon enough.

Just as we aren't born knowing how to play the piano, we don't know how to recover from an addiction either. At first, we gut it out, often through sheer force of will. But that won't help us for very long. We need to learn from others – what did *they* do? What worked for *them*? Maybe it'll work for me too!

"Read, read, read," Jean says. And she's right. Not only will you be learning a TON, you'll be filling that void that alcohol used to fill – and you'll be filling time until your "sober feet" feel solid beneath you.

Statements To Use:

#8 – "The fundamental object of life is emotional and spiritual growth."

#13 – "I am responsible for myself and for my actions."

The third thing Jean advises has been a source of great comfort to me: *it's just a phase*. I'm still relatively new to this sobriety thing (at seven months, I'm smack in the "where do I fit in?" place, actually), but I remember some valuable lessons from quitting smoking (another addiction that's viciously hard to kick). Time was, I thought there was absolutely *no way* I could

ever simply accept my non-smoker status as easily as I do the fact that I have brown eyes. Time was, “not smoking” consumed my every thought. I just couldn’t imagine that I would *ever* feel normal again.

But you know what? That’s exactly what happened. I rarely even think about it anymore. That feeling of “not belonging” around my smoking buddies at work (one of whom subsequently died of lung cancer, tragically) or the members of my family who still smoke passed. **It was just a phase**, after all!

Quitting drinking will be that way one day. One day – one day soon, I hope – I’ll simply be a non-drinker, the way I’m now a non-smoker. It hasn’t happened yet, but one day...

Statements To Use:

#3 – “Happiness is a habit I will develop.”

#4 – “Problems bother me only to the degree that I permit them to.”

The last piece of advice Jean gives is, in some ways, the hardest to follow. She advises us to “keep our minds filled with positive **thoughts**” and says “we must keep working at **replacing negative thoughts with positive ones.**” Whoa. Not asking for much, is she? ☺ I don’t know about you, but for me, alcoholism’s the tip of the iceberg. The huge, cold, deadly iceberg. The self-loathing iceberg. It took almost 50 years of programming for the “tape in my head” to run on a continual negative loop. Reprogramming that tape is a work in progress - a very important work in progress.

Remember that old *Saturday Night Live* sketch featuring a character named “Stuart Smalley” doing self-help affirmations? The catchphrase that’s endured is “I’m good enough, I’m smart enough, and gosh darn it, people like me!” Yeah, it’s funny. It’s also true. It’s also necessary.

When I saw “The Help” last year, I cried – blubbered, to be more accurate – when Viola Davis’ character repeatedly told her toddler charge (who was cursed with a cold, non-maternal mother), “You is kind, you is smart, you is important.” This was before I quit drinking – perhaps my blubbering should have been a clue that something needed to change in me.

These days, when I catch myself saying “Katy, don’t be stupid” or “For God’s sake, you idiot, just stop that,” I try to stop *immediately* and reframe the statement. “Okay, that’s not the smartest thing you’ve ever done – how about you try it this way?” or something. Take loathing out of the equation completely. (There are really very few occasions that call for loathing, when you think about it. Genocide? Possibly. Burning dinner? Uh, no. Why do we *do* that to ourselves?)

Drinking to excess was one way to justify hating myself. It was an endless loop-de-loop: “I hate myself *because* I drink/I hate myself so I drink...”

Let’s get off the ride, shall we? Let’s replace the negative thoughts with positive ones.

We have new friends who share our struggles here at WFS; there are lots of great recovery books out there to help us on our way. This uncomfortable feeling will pass and, most importantly, we CAN change that self-destructive tape in our head.

Statements To Use:

#2 – “Negative thoughts destroy only myself.”

#5 – “I am what I think.”

#7 – “Love can change the course of my world.”

#12 – “I am a competent woman and have much to give life.”

While “wanting to belong,” remember that the best place to belong is in your own skin. Use Jean’s tools to handle this difficult stage and you’ll get there sooner than you think. And if you’re having a rough go of it, just remember the daily pledge – there’s a sober sister waiting to take your hand. ☼ [February 2013]

Comments from Sherry “Trying2BeMe”:

Every month, in my connections online group, we share our goals for that month. One of my ongoing goals is to do something out of my comfort zone very week. Writing is way out of my comfort zone, so participating in this comment/series should take care of my entire February.

I volunteered to help with this writing, having very little time belonging to WFS or my current sobriety. Much to my surprise, I was asked to write my thoughts about wanting to belong. I will start by giving thanks to the wonderful writers that have preceded me in January and February and to all of the women on the message boards who share their daily victories and struggles. You all make me feel like I belong to an incredibly strong, yet sensitive world.

I am a professional at trying to fit in and wanting to belong. My father was career Air Force and we moved to a new place at least every other year. There was always a sense of urgency to find a friend or group, anything at all that I could belong to. That rarely happened; I became a very gregarious loner. Now, many years later, I am learning to belong in and to myself. Fundamentally, that is where we must start. This may be the stage that Jean referred to the black period; that point where we have a great deal of discomfort. Who are we, what do we stand for, how are we ever going to be able to move forward with such a strong pull to go in reverse? It is sort of like the ages of 11-15 years old to me. That span of time where you are no longer

a child, but not quite a teenager and being an adult is not even on the radar. We have put down the alcohol; no longer do we belong to the drinking period, but it is uncomfortable and we don't quite belong to the sober period of our life yet either. I think that this is the stage that so many women get stuck and give up. I beg you to hang on, ride it out just a little further. You can't reach the pot of gold until you have climbed to the highest point of the rainbow.

I read many online posts from women that are afraid of never having fun anymore; perhaps they will lose all of their friends because they have become sober. This is the point that Jean tells us to hang in there. Stick with our new friends, they will hold us up and welcome us into the fold. We don't have to give up our old friends, but gradually we begin to grow and blossom. Our own comfort zone expands. We learn to belong to ourselves, in our own minds; and, with that growth. We begin to ease into belonging to others. It is a beautiful thing. We can glide back and forth with a new found confidence, we know who we are. Our authenticity allows us to be comfortable in many different situations. People look at us different. All of a sudden there is a feeling of belonging.

For me, engaging others with a sincere and interested mindset has helped me learn where I truly want to belong.

When we are active drinkers, we tend to stick with other drinkers. When we are actively sober, we have the opportunity to belong to so many different threads of humanity. Our horizons are expansive. Choices are ours to make.

Addictions are isolating, they prevent us from belonging. They cause us to hide; we hide how much we drink, we hide when we drink, we hide when we are hung-over and are sad because we are missing out on life. Simply put, addiction prevents us from belonging.

Life is big. Live it. ☺ [February 2013]