



Serenity Prayer gets to the heart of recovery

In the concentration camp, Viktor Frankl was prisoner No. 119,104. He spent most of his time in forced labor, laying tracks for Nazi railway lines. At one point, his job was to dig a tunnel for an underground water main. He worked alone. His reward was a coupon worth 12 cigarettes. Instead, he exchanged the token for 12 bowls of soup so he could avoid starving.

Many people assume that the only response to this situation would be misery or insanity. Yet, even in the concentration camp, Frankl felt free. In *Man's Search for Meaning: An Introduction to Logotherapy* (Beacon Press, ed. 4), Frankl concluded that everything can be taken from us except one thing: the last of human freedoms -- to choose one's own attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way.

Another name for this freedom is acceptance. And acceptance is the key to the Serenity Prayer, commonly recited at meetings of Alcoholics Anonymous and other Twelve Step groups:

*God grant me the serenity
to accept the things I cannot change,
courage to change the things I can,
and wisdom to know the difference.*

If we can understand what this prayer means, then we can better understand what recovery from addiction is about.

As human beings, we have two basic strategies for handling any situation that disturbs us. One is to change the situation. For example, if we were chronically short on money, we can trim our expenses or seek a higher-paying job. If we were lonely, we can call a friend.

This is how we usually cope with distress: We try to alter the world outside us. And in many cases, this is powerful and appropriate.

However, circumstances are sometimes beyond our power to change. A sudden, unpredicted expense may undercut our plans to save money. We can call a friend to quell our loneliness, but that person may not be at home. Hoping we can control every event that comes our way is like hoping we can control the weather.

In such moments, we often forget we have a second option: We can change our response to the situation. This second option is the one Frankl discovered. While he was in the concentration camp, escape was not feasible. He was powerless over his situation. So he responded by dwelling on thoughts that empowered him.

More specifically, Frankl stayed alive to the beauty of nature. Even the Nazis could not take away sunsets. He imagined amusing incidents that could take place in the future, allowing himself to laugh. And he remembered the people he loved. I understood, he wrote, how a man who has nothing left in this world may still know bliss, be it only for a brief moment, in the contemplation of his beloved.

It's possible to discover how these two options work in our own lives. Complete this sentence: I could be happy only if . . . Typical answers usually include the right job, the right relationship, more money, a new car, a child, a house. All of these have to do with the first option -- having the right circumstances. All are attempts to change the world outside our heads.

But addiction is one of those situations that we were powerless over, and recovery from addiction means

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looking for serenity elsewhere -- in the world inside our heads. It's learning how to dwell on beliefs, attitudes and thoughts that remain true no matter what happens to us.

Veronica Ray, in her book *Choosing Happiness: The Art of Living Unconditionally* (Hazelden), makes the same point: The most important thing to learn about happiness, I believe, is that it is a choice. We always have it available to us; it's within each of us. What we need to remember is that there's always another way of looking at anything.

As the Serenity Prayer reminds us, this means changing what we can, accepting what we can't, and knowing the difference. For people in recovery -- for all of us -- such knowledge is the heart of serenity.

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Alive & Free is a health column that provides information to help prevent substance abuse problems and address such problems. It is created by Hazelden, a nonprofit agency based in Center City, Minn., that offers a wide range of information and services on addiction. For more resources, [email](#) or call Hazelden at 800-257-7810 (outside the US 651-213-4200).