

Freedom, Entry #1 of 5

The ability to grow spiritually enables us to find freedom, even within the walls of a cell. Our greatest freedom is not outside ourselves but within (*Guiding Principles, Tradition Five, opening essay*).

Many addicts first hear our message of hope while incarcerated, often thanks to the hard work of our H&I trusted servants. One member shared, "When I got out, I heard someone share about a 'self-made prison,' and I was mad at first. They didn't know what it was like to be on the inside. But the more I came to meetings and heard addicts share about the disease, I realized that we had more in common than I thought. Just being out didn't mean I was free... yet."

Freedom comes in many forms. The ability to come and go freely as we wish, a right denied when or if we are incarcerated, is just one of those forms. We can experience mental, emotional, and spiritual freedom wherever we go—or wherever we stay. One member wrote, "I thought freedom meant doing whatever I wanted whenever I wanted, as long as I stayed clean. But I felt trapped by my impulses. I couldn't say no to myself anymore, even when my behavior had consequences. When I told my sponsor I wanted to stop ____ but didn't know how, they told me to sit with the impulse and see if I could learn something from it. I sat with it, and didn't act on it, and I learned that I could survive the feeling. The feeling passed, and I felt light. I felt free."

The most obvious freedom we gain in recovery is physical—we gain freedom from our compulsive use of drugs. That physical freedom, that changed behavior, has a corresponding inner component—the peace of mind that comes with no longer being trapped in obsession and self-centeredness. We are free to think of something other than where our next fix is coming from. We are free to feel something other than despair. We are free.

Wherever I am, whatever is going on around me, I will seek inner freedom by letting thoughts and feelings come and go without disturbing my peace, without throwing me off balance.

Freedom, Entry #2 of 5

Gradually, we come to experience freedom from some of our deepest wounds. As we begin to clear up some of the confusion and contradiction in our lives, we can move forward with less of the baggage we brought in with us (*Living Clean*, Chapter 4, "Sex").

Freedom for any recovering addict begins with not using. But as the fog lifts, our emotional turmoil becomes more apparent. To stay clean, we need a different approach to deal with our underlying issues. We understand that we can be free from active addiction—but can we be free from our deepest wounds?

We'd love that answer to be a resounding "absolutely!"—and for some, it will be. But for many of us who've suffered traumas and abuse, the more realistic answer is: *We can heal. We can move forward. We can gain more freedom than we have today.* Recovery from addiction is a process, and so is letting go of "baggage," especially the burdens we never asked for and, no doubt, the ones we inflicted on others.

That process can be fierce, terrifying, sometimes beautiful, often unexpected. We gain freedom from working Steps and sharing about our past with each other. We get relief through meditation and prayer, perhaps through outside help, through the passage of time and patience with ourselves. We try not to avoid or disconnect from painful memories. Instead, we deal with our baggage as best we can and realize that some of what we've been carrying isn't ours. We come to some acceptance and healing, finding forgiveness for ourselves for not letting go. And, equally as important, we help others to do the same.

While some wounds may never fully heal, they don't overwhelm us today. They don't run our lives—or our relationships with others, with our bodies, and with the world. We can learn how to relate to others and respond to their needs without sacrificing our own. We can be vulnerable, and explore physical and emotional intimacy. We can find freedom, lose it a little, and regain it by digging in again.

My pain doesn't define me, and I can use it to help someone else to heal. I will find both refuge and freedom in the Steps and in my fellow addict.

Freedom, Entry #3 of 5

We are free to participate, create, care and share, surprise ourselves, take risks, be vulnerable, and stand on our own two feet (*Living Clean*, Chapter 1, "Keys to Freedom").

When we stop using, we eliminate the most obvious symptom of the disease and the source of many of our problems. Abstinence alone, however, is seldom enough to straighten out our thinking. Even after the drugs are gone, our outlook, priorities, and personalities remain distorted. If we want to be free from all aspects of the disease, it will take some work.

"My self-centeredness had me tied me up in knots," one member recalled. "I was angry and judgmental, greedy for attention and material things, dishonest with others and myself. Just not using was just not enough. It took time and change for me to get free from my self-imposed prison."

We get relief along the way and glimpse what it's like to be unburdened from self-centered fear. Stepwork loosens the grip that worry and shame once had on us, freeing us to live in today. We find freedom in having friends we can count on and confide in, in belly laughs that aren't chemically induced, in the depth of our empathy for others' struggles. We stay aware of our spiritual condition, not settling for freedom's cheap substitute: irresponsibility. Humility liberates us to be a little more forgiving of others and ourselves, recognizing that we're all works-in-progress. We're grateful for our new capacity to stay in the present and for the respite we get from the disease when we tend to our spiritual wellness. We face life's many choices knowing that, no matter what, we'll be okay.

Freedom is a state of mind, not a state of being. The NA program helps us discover and discard limiting beliefs and patterns that keep us stuck, regardless of our living conditions. "Each day offers a fresh start and another opportunity to cast off my mental, emotional, and spiritual shackles," wrote one member from the confines of a prison. "If I want to fly, I have to let go of the baggage that's weighing me down." That's apt advice for all of us.

I will release something that's kept me bound. I'll let go of it daily if that's what it takes to live free.

Freedom, Entry #4 of 5

Letting go of the idea that we have to understand why things happen or how it all works frees us to have a spiritual experience without wondering if we're doing it right (*Living Clean*, Chapter 2, "Connection to a Higher Power").

Addicts are perceptive people, or so we like to think. When we were using, we could go somewhere we'd never been and easily find either a way to get drugs or someone to use with. Our intuitions and insights often serve us well in recovery, especially as the Steps help us to improve our ability to discern between the voice of self-will and that of conscience. Learning the difference can be a challenge since the disease talks to us in our own voice. Freedom from our disease depends on it. With practice and the help of other recovering addicts, we improve our connection to our intuition and our conscience. We gain the freedom to make better choices, and our lives improve.

Trusting in the process—and in our own conscience—can be scary. How can putting down the drugs make the obsession go away? How can we be sure that our sponsor won't share our inventory with everyone? What happens if we let go of that defect that has been protecting us? We just don't like not knowing.

Step Two in our Basic Text tells us, "We can use this Power long before we understand it," and one member shared, "I've been staying clean on a Higher Power that I don't understand for over 25 years, and I'm starting to get okay with never knowing. It still works!"

No matter how perceptive we are, our perception is limited. There are wavelengths of light not visible to the human eye, pitches of sound not perceptible to the human ear. We cannot know the totality of things. When we get okay with not knowing, we can shift our focus to what we do feel, sense, and perceive in the present. We are free to be right here, right now.

It's okay if I don't know. I will enjoy the freedom to just be.

Freedom, Entry #5 of 5

We are free to change our minds, to change our perspective, and to change our lives. Freedom means that we are no longer living by default (*Living Clean*, Chapter 3, "Awakening to Our Spirituality").

In active addiction we lived in default mode: neglecting responsibilities and disregarding the consequences of our action or inaction. We were utterly vulnerable to our defects, self-destructive, harmful to others. A member offered this metaphor: "I was on an amusement park ride that started off fun. But then I couldn't get off of it, even though it made me sick." Default living made us miserable, yet even the slightest suggestion that we could change would elicit a defensive, "That's just how I am!" *Trapped* is how we were. And sometimes we still are today through our willful denial, our rigidity, by fearing and avoiding change.

Outside of ourselves, change is inevitable, and recovery helps us deal with this fact. Within ourselves, change is a net-positive, a dynamic force exercised through the freedom of choice we now have. "Freedom isn't just a state of being," the member continued. "We practice it by choosing to change. We're no longer trapped on a nauseating ride. We leave the active addiction amusement park behind. Life in recovery is a whole different park!"

We achieve some freedom in NA when we realize our true selves. Maybe it's less that we change and more that we become who we truly are. We become not so attached to our story; we can write a new one. We can reexamine aspects of ourselves that we never thought to question—our religion, political leanings, musical tastes, even the food we eat. We get to be curious. We're free to not be so cool.

Being clean allows us to challenge our belief systems and behavior patterns. We can act less impulsively; a breath provides a moment to respond with love, not fear. At our best, we are flexible, evolving, able to be influenced by others. There's freedom in open-mindedness. We learn how to say no and to say yes. Though there will be times when we default back to default mode, we don't have to linger there. We've got a life to live.

I will live this day consciously and with purpose. In choosing to change, I'm choosing to be myself. I'm choosing freedom.