

Who Are You, Anyway? The Changing Perceptions of Yourself During Recovery

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Who do you think you are? How do you see yourself? What fundamental beliefs do you hold about yourself at your deepest, core level?

These are not idle questions. Nor are they merely philosophical musings. Your answer to these questions is fundamental to your success or failure in recovery.

Carl Rogers, famous humanistic psychologist, believed that an individual's experience of their core *inner self* was the most important element for personal change and growth. He believed that all motivation came from one's interest in serving the needs of the inner self.

For people with addiction, sadly, there is often a negative, rather than positive, view of their true, inner selves. The late John Bradshaw, renowned addictions expert, felt that deeply held feelings of shame and guilt were the core factors that lead to addictive behaviors. In his book, *Healing the Shame That Binds You* (2005, Health Communications), he said that “a person with internalized shame believes he is inherently flawed, inferior and defective. Such a feeling is so painful that defending scripts (or strategies) are developed to cover it up. These scripts are the roots of violence, criminality, war and all forms of addiction.” Aldous Huxley, in his 1954 book *Doors of Perception*, said that people use drugs as “chemical vacations from intolerable selfhood.”

How Perception Shapes Our Reality

Beliefs about ourselves are formed from our experiences, starting in childhood, and they continue to be developed throughout our lives. One important way that we develop our overall perceptions of ourselves is by getting feedback from others. In many ways, how we perceive ourselves is based on how we think others perceive us. Other ways that we develop our self-perception is through the roles we play – as friends, co-workers, parents, etc.

Changing Perceptions of One's Self Throughout Recovery

Addicts often hold painful, shameful or guilt-provoking beliefs about themselves. The real work of recovery comes not from managing to stop one's substance use, but in overcoming the self-defeating, painful (and usually inauthentic) negative self-beliefs that are the underlying impetus for substance use. The greater goal is to create new, more positive perceptions of one's true, innermost self.

Addicts often use lies, distortions and excuses to deflect the truth because they fear that the truth emphasizes negative aspects of themselves and their personalities. They may lie to cover up or diminish the extent of their substance use, or to avoid recognizing the negative impact that their actions have on friends and family.

Over time, lies, omissions and deceptions negatively influence the addict's self-perceptions, adding to the cycle of lying, guilt and shame. But in recovery, honesty is stressed and promoted. The recovering person is given the opportunity and the motivation to relinquish negative self-deceptions, lies and deceit.

Twelve Step and other types of recovery programs address the underlying fears that often hold addicts hostage to negative self-perceptions. Fears of losing something they value and get from substance use (relief from difficult emotions; pleasurable brain-stimulus) can keep addicts from embracing recovery. But once accepted, the recovery process can address stubborn, underlying negative self-perceptions and can lead to true self-acceptance and freedom from the tyranny of drugs or alcohol.

The Truth Will Set You Free

The first step in changing negative self-perceptions and self-beliefs is to embrace honesty – *radical* honesty – where no distortions, minimizations or half-truths obscure the reality of one's situation. One of the reasons 12-Step programs work for people is that they provide a place where the recovering person can be radically honest and bare embarrassing secrets about themselves without fear of judgment or ridicule. Becoming honest with one's self is the first important step on the road to recovery.

As you become more honest and real, you will find that your perceptions of yourself and your actions begin to change. You begin to see yourself as someone who is *capable* of being an honorable person. This is a huge turn-around from seeing yourself as flawed or defective. It is this change in self-perception that provides the motivation to continue the work of recovery.

As you move forward, you begin to re-write the internal mental “script” that you use to define yourself. With each success, each positive change in behavior, and each life-affirming vs. self-destructive choice, you build a new, more positive belief system about yourself. You slowly move from seeing yourself as a person *capable* of being honorable and making positive changes to one who *is* making such changes. At this point, having the support of peers who understand your journey – peers who can support you and give you feedback and suggestions – is extremely helpful. Finally, with continued commitment and support, you arrive at your goal – you attain a new, positive and empowered view of yourself. You perceive yourself as a person who no longer needs to hide any aspect of themselves or use substances to avoid feeling self-shame or guilt.

Tips for Gaining Self- Awareness and Changing Self-Perception

- **Change your story:** Your perception of yourself comes from the *story* you tell yourself about yourself. Look at the major circumstances that shaped your life. Reflect on how these situations made you feel about yourself. It is the *meaning that you made about yourself* because of the situation, rather than the situation itself, that impacts you today. If you had a tragic or painful trauma occur, you may have felt victimized and powerless. But you can change that viewpoint, using today’s perspective, and see that this situation may also have resulted in you becoming more resourceful, resilient and empathetic. Focusing on this viewpoint will lead you toward your goal of changing your self-perception. You can begin to view yourself not as a victim, but as an empowered person who has gained strength and resiliency by overcoming great difficulty.
- **Seek and use honest feedback from appropriate sources:** Others often act as mirrors for us to view ourselves. Don’t *assume* that people think you are flawed, defective or hopeless. Ask trusted friends, people in your support network and/or a therapist or counselor to give you honest feedback about what they see in you, and any areas that you might want to improve. By seeking feedback from people who care about you and your success, you can feel confident that the insights are valid. Take time to reflect on the feedback and honestly evaluate it, rather than reacting impulsively, as some feedback may trigger defensiveness in you. But knowing that its intent is to point you in the right direction rather than demean you, with reflection, you may discover the exact issues that are most relevant to you. You may also discover strategies that can help you make the positive changes you desire.