

Sober Talk Article for November 6<sup>th</sup>, 2008  
Gratitude: Part of Self-Acceptance  
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As the calendar flips to November, thoughts turn to Thanksgiving and the beginning of the holiday season. While the first Thanksgiving was celebrated in 1621 to share the harvest reaped by the Plymouth Colony, all 13 colonies did not celebrate it at the same time until 1777. On October 3, 1863, Lincoln delivered his Thanksgiving Proclamation, “in the midst of a civil war of unequalled magnitude and severity”, in which he invited “as with one heart and one voice, by the whole American people...to set apart and observe the last Thursday of November as a day of thanksgiving...” Lincoln recognized the necessity to make whole a populace that had been fractured by tremendous loss of family, personal property, community and stability. In order to move past the grief, shame, blaming and resentment in the midst of intense conflict towards the process of unification, he understood the need to acknowledge the losses experienced and how those losses had transformed the individuals who survived them.

This concept of gratitude is key to the process of recovery. For the addict, the drugs used represent not only the reason his/her life has fallen apart, but also the source of euphoria otherwise absent in his/her life, and a way to avoid emotional and physical pain.

Drugs had become the central organizing factor around which all daily decisions were made. An addict may be able to establish abstinence for a period of time, but to maintain abstinence for a lifetime he/she must first grieve the loss of the substance. In the addict’s mind, the use of the substance may have allowed greater comfort in social situations, or numbed painful memories of emotional trauma, or the alleviation of chronic physical pain. It may have been the only time the addict could remember “feeling

happy.” Understanding the function that drug use served in the addict’s life is one of the first steps in indentifying healthier methods of meeting those personal needs. If drinking in a bar was the only way the addict was meeting the need to feel accepted and to socialize, then he/she must now develop other sober activities and relationships with individuals to meet that need, and practice being in social situations without the use of the drug.

Recognizing the “good” and the “bad” aspects of the individual’s drug use is also a step in the direction of self-acceptance. If the addict cannot examine his/her drug use in this way, it can reinforce feelings of shame and guilt associated with his/her drug use, and ultimately jeopardize his/her recovery. Emotional pain and trauma shape how we see ourselves and others. The struggle through that pain helps us to better understand what we need, healthier ways to meet those needs, and the consequences of those choices. Then there is no need to avoid looking at that part of our lives, nor the need to blame others for our situations, nor see ourselves as helpless to change that situation to have a better life.

Being grateful for the struggle towards abstinence and recovery, changes the period of drug abuse from something to be ashamed of into part of the process of developing understanding and acceptance of ourselves. It shifts the focus from what is perceived to be missing in one’s life to being thankful for what is there: the clarity of a drug free mind, a supportive network of people who have struggled with the same addiction, improved health, and being in control of one’s choices rather than drugs running our lives.

Gratitude is part of self-acceptance. Integrating our good and bad choices help us understand how we came to the choice of abstinence and recovery. It allows us to live in

the present and choose where we want to be. Happy Thanksgiving!

*The Sober Talk column is provided by the Alcohol & Drug Council of Tompkins County and appears in the Journal monthly.*