

Do It When You're NOT Ready

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I attend a weekly gathering where I, along with my sangha (“community of wise friends”), apply the practice of meditation and Buddhist thought towards remedying the suffering we experience (and have caused) through our addictions. After one such meeting, a wise friend sought feedback from all of us regarding what she should say to someone that had reached out to her; the person was very interested in learning about our practice, but was anxious about fitting-in because they were not yet ready to commit to sobriety.

I always want to be welcoming to anyone interested in joining our sangha. Although I am hesitant to completely shrug off the commitment we make to sobriety, I strongly connect with the anxiety of not belonging. I have spent the majority of my own adult life feeling like I do not fit in anywhere, and alcohol often felt like one of the only ways I could manage those feelings of isolation. It also seems absurd (in my mind) that sobriety be expected for admission into a group of people that struggle with addiction. It's a bit like how banks only want to extend credit to people that have already had credit.

My response (and that of all fellow sangha members), was that we should make it clear to everyone that they are welcome regardless of where they are on their path. Experience taught each of us that it is always better to join the community, and potentially be uncomfortable, than it is to struggle alone. This is not a surprising conclusion, given the context. Nevertheless, I have also learned from my own experience that there is a great deal of depth behind the anxiety of joining a recovery group (or any kind of group). The uncertainty and vulnerability it entails can be a major obstacle that prevents many from trying. For this reason, I felt compelled to address why I think the best time to join a recovery sangha (or any sangha for any reason) is when you don't feel like you're ready to make the commitment.

Modern society gives a lot of options for self-care, and a lot of feedback on what we may or may not be doing correctly. We even have access to AI technology that helps us decide which options and feedback are most relevant. But to date, no AI platform exists that is as effective and efficient at justifying my own harmful behaviors to myself as that of my own mind. I suspect that, despite the ridiculous wealth and resources of the Googles, Amazons, and Microsofts of the world, it would be an impossible task to create something more convincing to me than my own mind:

“I can’t talk about myself that way with strangers.”

“It’s not a big enough problem to involve other people.”

“If I do it, I have to do it on my own—how is anyone else going to help me?”

“Those groups are for people that seriously need help. I’m not that bad.”

My mind’s justifications are Legion. Beyond my past struggles with drugs and alcohol, they can involve behavior that ranges from ice cream binges to extravagant online purchases of things I definitely don’t need. Convincing myself that I should have something I want is my superpower. The above examples of inner dialog, however, are specific to one past situation: my intuition was guiding me to seek out others for help, but my ego was uncomfortable with opening myself up to a group. I expect that nearly everyone has had similar thoughts, even if they were not specific to addiction. It is natural for human beings to avoid what makes them uncomfortable. The mind has literally been engineering itself for over a million years to avoid unpleasant things. It is no wonder that there is a seeming increase in the frequency of general and social anxiety in modern culture. The human mind, when untethered, has become an expert at spiraling out of control with potential gloom and doom scenarios.

I spent approximately twenty-five years abusing alcohol, and though I don’t think it really registered as a “problem” until after the first decade, the issue persisted well beyond that point because my mind reinforced the notion that I was managing. “Even if it is a problem,” I would think, I needed to be able to tackle it alone. I was *certain* I could tackle it alone.

When I finally saw that my mind’s mantra was “this is fine...” when it absolutely was *not* fine, I thankfully had the wisdom to know that a different, albeit uncomfortable approach was necessary for change. I needed support, and I had needed it for a while. In truth, my mind would have never reached a state where I felt “ready” to seek out a group. I believe this is common, and that it is perhaps why some people need a collection of rock-bottom moments to force them into a community.

Now, with what I feel is enough sobriety behind me to begin sorting out who I am psychologically and spiritually, I find that I wish I had sought out my community earlier. I am careful not to dwell on those regrets, but I acknowledge and accept that, had I reached out sooner, I would have been unmeasurably further along on the path of my

soul's purpose. Until recently, I had not understood how important that was for me, or how central to that purpose it is to build my sangha.

Hopefully the edges of what I'm trying to convey have become more defined through this exposition of my self. The wisdom that I have extrapolated from my own experience of addiction (but also of isolation in general) is that your mind is a crotchety little gremlin that *can not* and *will not* break free of its conditioning in seclusion. You need other people who, through their own personal stories of failures and successes, hold up a mirror that more accurately allows you to see the truth of yourself.

Using all of this as a lens—the denial, the self-justification, and the gremlin brain—it's easy to understand why you will never feel ready to make a parade of your personal struggle. It's exposing. Everything inside you tells you to keep it inside where it is safe from judgement and ridicule. But you *have* to let go. To move forward, you have to be willing to be vulnerable to others. You have to do it again and again until you become comfortable with being uncomfortable. And you have to do it now. You have to do it even when you're not ready.