

# **Don't Let Grief Derail Your Transition Into Recovery**

**By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.**

Grieving the loss of the chemical is a common experience in the early stages of recovery. For many individuals struggling with substance use disorder, the substance becomes their closest companion. When this bond is severed, the individual experiences grief. Even though they have seen how their use of those substances has caused significant problems and much distress in their life, they still have fond memories and an emotional attachment to the chemical.

The person with a substance use problem may still see the drinking and drug use in terms of "still having fun" when circumstances dictate that it is time to quit. The substance, a frequent if not constant companion, fulfills various significant and necessary roles in the person's life. However, the more entwined the substance becomes in a person's life, the more problems associated with it. Still, the person is heavily invested in continuing to drink or use drugs and reluctant to part ways with their closest companion. Defense mechanisms distort the reality of their relationship with alcohol or other drugs. They can continue to remember the fun and positives related to the chemical while minimizing the harm and justifying their continuing use.

At the onset of recovery, many individuals harbor ambivalence about quitting. They hope that by implementing better rules, strategies, or drinking habits, they can regain or maintain control over their substance use. Becoming abstinent and "giving up" alcohol or other drugs can be experienced emotionally as a grieving process, like with the loss of a person, pet, or other significant thing (e.g., a job).

Impaired control over the use of the substance is a defining characteristic of addiction, yet loss of the chemical is experienced as profound and can involve grief. In early recovery, many feel like they're being punished by having to give up chemicals to sort their lives out. This can lead to sadness and anger, as they perceive others as taking something important away from them.

Anxiety and depression often occur during early recovery as the body undergoes detoxification. While these symptoms naturally decrease over time for many individuals, some may require antidepressants to manage them effectively. It's common for depression and anxiety to be conditions in which individuals have used substances to self-medicate.

Abstinence and early recovery require healthy replacements for the roles the chemicals play. Early recovery is a time of learning and using alternatives to mood-altering chemicals, including the development of new coping skills. These replacements reduce the symptoms and assist people with dealing with life in ways that do not necessarily involve escape, numbing, disinhibition, or other roles that mood-altering drugs serve. Healthy replacements may include socializing, exercising, dietary changes, participating in 12-step meetings, enhancing self-esteem and self-efficacy, and replacing worry with effective problem-solving strategies. These new coping behaviors, the building blocks of new life skills, are acquired through actively engaging in a recovery program, identifying areas needing improvement, and deliberately acquiring new skills.

Many individuals are prompted to seek recovery when the pain of continued substance use (and its consequences) outweighs the fear of quitting and grief of loss. Life after addiction is possible, and the grief eventually fades. People who are recovering even learn to have fun and experience joy. While many approach sobriety with fear, despair, and resentment, these feelings often transform into gratitude for recovery, restored relationships, and a return to physical, emotional, financial, and spiritual well-being. **Note: This article has been revised and edited from its original version, which was previously published in 2010 on this site. The content has been updated for contemporary language, clarity and accuracy.**



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