

Cultivating Boredom: Managing Frustration and Restlessness in Addiction Recovery

By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.

When people begin their recovery journey, they often experience a wide range of uncomfortable emotions. The feeling of boredom is familiar in early recovery, and it may manifest as an ineffable desire for something while not knowing what that desire is. During active addiction, the desire to use had a name, whether alcohol, pot or any other type of drug of choice.

The lifestyle of someone with substance use disorder often involves a strong need or compulsion to spend time with drinking/using friends and engaging in activities centered around using or drinking. Individuals shift their time and attention from substance-oriented to recovery-enhancing activities. In early recovery, you first learn to avoid people, places, and things that trigger a desire to use. Another early lesson is the importance of replacing chemicals with healthy alternatives. People in early recovery learn to substitute meetings, meditation, and other healthy activities for their substance of choice. They might still be bored and discouraged and learn to cultivate new interests. They may discover that they have an underlying addiction to the excitement, and with the absence of the chemical, there is a general absence of crazy-making behavior and drama.

The euphoria from chemicals feeling is often not the only adrenaline rush that people become addicted to. They can also experience a yearning for the adrenaline rush from the chaos and crazy-making accompanying addiction. If recovery has slowed you down where you aren't going 200 miles an hour with your hair on fire or engaging in dangerous situations, the rush may be absent. However, some individuals might keep the chaos

and drama going not only because it is a "high" but because they have poor impulse control and a low tolerance for calmness.

It is frustrating when someone has a need or desire for something, and they don't know what that something is. Many people with substance use disorder have poor tolerance for uncomfortable feelings and frustration. One of the primary tasks in early recovery is developing the ability to tolerate painful feelings. Recovering people are encouraged to "sit with" their feelings, to "de-catastrophize" them, and to use cognitive therapy to challenge irrational thoughts and beliefs that exacerbate their feelings and dysfunctional reactions to them. They might also use breathing, relaxation skills, and meditation to slow things down and become mindful of the present. An appropriate plan of action for managing calmness (sic: boredom) in recovery involves four steps:

Step 1: Learn to tolerate boredom.

Those in recovery can learn to use breathing, relaxation skills, and meditation to slow things down and become mindful of the present. They can learn to tolerate these calm, peaceful feelings and enjoy them and their activities.

Step 2: Develop a different list of exciting activities.

Develop a list of "exciting" and fun things you can do without jeopardizing your recovery. This list should involve endeavors that do not take someone into "slippery places" with "slippery people." Activities short of going 100 miles per hour can still be exciting. Similarly, developing an "ing" list is also helpful—it's a list of activities that someone and their significant others might like to do, like skiing, rollerblading, bowling, etc.

Step 3: Learn to improve your frustration tolerance.

Practicing awareness of frustration, assigning a rating of frustration on a scale of 0 to 10, applying new skills, and assessing your frustration improvement. New skills involve cognitive therapy for challenging cognitive distortions that increase frustration, reframing, refocusing, and applying any needed problem-solving. People can also learn to substitute short-

term rewards or gratification for more significant, better outcomes in the future. Identify some things you can do to de-escalate frustration (i.e., self-soothing, positive self-talk, decatastrophizing frustration, etc.). You can also remind yourself that you don't have to have what you want when you want it.

Step 4: Reassess your values. The things you valued and prioritized before recovery are different. If you look back and find something you once prized missing, remind yourself that it does not fit with you now that you are sober. If you feel dissatisfied with your life in recovery, consider where your dissatisfaction lies before making any drastic changes. Avoid impulsive changes, such as moving to a new location or quitting your job. Recovering people have been known to engage in "geographical cures," just like they might have done when trying to regain control over their drinking or using. To tolerate this discomfort, just be still and pay attention. Do what you know is aligned with your recovery goals, and this feeling will pass. And don't worry that you will become dull in recovery. You won't.

In summary, learn to tolerate and enjoy the absence of chaos and destructive excitement. It may feel like boredom when it is an ineffable desire for something while not knowing what that desire is. While it is a familiar feeling in early recovery, you can develop the ability to tolerate uncomfortable feelings by creating a list of safe and "exciting" activities, improving frustration tolerance, and assessing one's life to identify the source of dissatisfaction. By learning to manage "boredom," individuals in recovery can continue to build a fulfilling life in sobriety.

