

Befriending Middle Ground in Sustained Recovery from Addiction

By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.

During early recovery, the focus is on disrupting the addiction's momentum to achieve continuing abstinence. Individuals dedicate much mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual energy to this pursuit. However, in sustained recovery, individuals can allocate more attention and effort not only to maintain sobriety and rectify the aftermath of their addiction but also to consciously evolve into the person they aspire to be. This phase involves cultivating balance in life and replacing old, non-therapeutic behavior patterns. Many of these patterns stem from cognitive distortions rooted in one's family background. Individuals from highly stressed families (e.g., families with addiction) often think and act in extremes, reflecting the behavioral patterns observed within their familial environment.

Despite achieving sobriety, individuals may still exhibit extreme thinking and behavior, characterized by "all or none" and "black or white" perspectives. Moderation seems non-existent, mirroring the absence of moderation in past substance use. Consequently, the concept of "middle ground" remains elusive.

In my work with couples in recovery, I frequently encounter exaggerated emotional responses to seemingly innocuous requests or statements. For instance, a simple request to adjust bedtime habits might trigger an extreme response like threatening to sleep separately. Similarly, a request from an employer to enhance communication might lead to quitting the job. Moving into middle-ground responses sometimes requires considerable effort to acknowledge its existence.

Individuals in recovery often oscillate between extremes when attempting to adopt new behavioral patterns. For instance, someone transitioning from passivity to assertiveness might swing from being overly passive to aggressive, mistakenly equating aggression with assertiveness. Similarly, individuals trying to cease enabling behaviors may perceive any assistance as enabling, failing to recognize simple acts of courtesy.

Parents endeavoring to change their disciplinary approach may also fall into this pattern, oscillating between extremes without considering moderate adjustments. Extreme thinking negates the possibility of a middle ground, resulting in a cycle of polarized behavior. This black-and-white thinking is challenging to live with, leading many spouses and family members to avoid or work around the individual, creating a stalemate situation.

Operating within a black-and-white framework necessitates psychological defense mechanisms to justify and uphold this perspective. Disagreements are perceived as personal attacks, reinforcing the belief that one's viewpoint is the only correct one. This mindset distances individuals from the closeness they desire with others.

People entrenched in extreme black/white, all-or-nothing thinking frequently struggle to connect their behavior with outcomes. They often attribute negative results to external factors rather than considering a middle-ground approach to problem-solving. Without embracing the middle ground, personal growth and development remain stunted.

In summary, continued growth in sustained recovery involves befriending the middle ground in thinking and responding. It involves incorporating the nuanced positions between extremes and fostering a more balanced approach to life. **Note: This article has been revised and edited from its original version, which was previously published in 2011 on this site. The content has been updated for contemporary language, clarity and accuracy.**



Now that you've grasped the importance of finding common ground and effective problem-solving, why not take your skills to the next level? Build new skills with "*Communication 101: Using I Messages for Positive Interactions*" and "*Fair Fight Tactics: A Brief Lesson*." Learn how to express yourself assertively and resolve conflicts constructively.

These are digital downloads, available immediately.