

Images of God, Parents and Self in Substance Abuse Recovery

John F. Robison, Ph.D., LCSW
400 N. Beth St., #D
Anaheim, CA 92806-3320

The spiritual dynamics that heal the self while in recovery from substance abuse were studied through interviews of 13 Alcoholic Anonymous members about their recovery stories. Two distinct childhood patterns of experience emerged. About half of the AA members reported having had severe childhood abuse, negative parental relationships, and negative God and self images. The other half reported no childhood abuse and a range of God, parent and self images. Shame and anger were dominant emotions for both groups, and affected God, parent and self images throughout recovery. Important factors for change included group support and love, sponsors, identifying with others and the group belief in God. Those with abuse histories had more difficulty developing positive God, parent and self images. Most informants remained ambivalent or negative toward traditional God images but developed others. Therapy for childhood abuse was often necessary in later recovery. Use of God, parent and self images by counselors is discussed.

Note: Table #1 is at the end of the article.

The 12 Step Program of Alcoholics Anonymous for recovery from alcoholism and addictions is often very powerful and effective. It facilitates major changes in persons in many different ways. Alcoholics Anonymous (1955) describes itself as a spiritual program and not as a psychological or psychotherapeutic program. Yet many psychological elements can be seen in the 12 Steps, and many people use the 12 Steps and psychotherapy to complement each other.

How the 12 Steps' spiritual dynamics lead to healing is the main question that is explored in this paper. In addition, clarity on how psychological and spiritual dynamics interact to promote healing and restoration of self is sought. These questions were explored by interviewing 13 persons who were advanced in their recovery from substance abuse, had thoroughly worked the 12 Steps and were involved in Alcoholics Anonymous (AA).

Background

The 12 Step Program is primarily a spiritual program that integrates many psychological ideas (A.A., 1955). The spiritual ideas of the 12 Steps are diverse, including some similar to Eastern spirituality's letting go of the will or obsessive control. The 12 Steps does not have clear grounding in any particular psychological theory. Object relations theory and narrative psychology may help provide a framework of psychological theory for the 12 Steps.

Within object relations theory, Kohut (1977) and Winnicott (1971) hold that the mother's relationship with the infant is crucial in the formation of the child's self. In Kohut's (1977) self psychology, selfobjects are representations of parents and parental figures that become internalized during infancy and childhood. The infant thinks it is one with its parents, usually the mother. Mirroring occurs, with the infant seeing itself in the eyes and reactions of its parents. A mother's consistent mirroring of the child's needs and affects helps the child internalize images of her nurturance and to trust that the world will meet its needs. The child internalizes images of its mother to help soothe itself in her absence.

Object internalizations do not form as literal representations of the parent, but symbolic ones. This is because neither a child, nor even an adult has the cognitive abilities to internalize or conceptualize completely accurately all aspects of another person. Individuals internalize images or symbols of the object, which are highly laden with the individual's interpretations and distortions of the other person.

God images are formed in a process similar to internalization of parental images. The child catches glimpses or has small understandings of God. The infinite God is impossible for a child or an adult to

conceive of, so symbols are used and internalized for God. The child uses what is in its environment to help it understand what God may be like. The dominant persons in their environment become the material for their symbolization of God.

All persons develop a God image or representations of a power greater than self, according to the studies by Rizzuto (1979). By age 3 with increasing cognitive development, children are struggling with questions of who created the world, and with their own grandiose desire for powers like their parents. Through parental and societal devotion to God, the child understands God as like its parents. The child observes its parents and other adults giving devotion to God. Since the child's parents are like God to the child, the parent's devotion to someone even greater than themselves is a mystery to the child. The parents and God then become associated and not clearly distinguished. The parents as objects become internalized, form the self, and become symbolized by a God image.

The mother's gradual but tolerable frustration in meeting the child's needs helps the child develop autonomy and form its self. These gradual frustrations encourage the child to develop its own abilities to meet its own needs. Enough memory of the mother's image and caretaking needs to have been internalized to sustain the child while it is finding the means to meet these small needs. Breakdowns in this process of object internalization, through traumatic frustrations of need gratification, result in fixation at that stage and the formation of a compensating or false and addictive self (Kohut, 1977; Chelton & Bonney, 1987). There is a much higher likelihood for traumatic events and stressors to have occurred in the childhoods of adults who abuse substances than for those who do not abuse substances.

Breakdowns in self development, according to Kohut, occur due to chronic failure of parents to respond empathically because of parental character pathology (Greenberg & Mitchell, 1983). The infant searches for any way to engage the parent. Usually the infant finds the parental need and attempts to fill it. This dynamic is similar to Winnicott's idea of the distortion of the true self into the false self. The child tries to change its self and behave in ways to please the parent. This is impossible, because the child does not have the ability to heal its parent. The child interprets the parent's lack of care for the child as the child not being worthy or being bad. This causes negative shaming of the child that goes to the child's core sense of self.

The child then does not have the healthy parental object internalizations it needs to take the risks and accomplish the tasks at various stages of its development. These traumatic developmental experiences may lay the bases for later addictive behavior (Chelton and Bonney, 1987). Addictions are attempts to distract the individual from the pain of its shame.

Object internalization and individuation from parents is a lifelong process (Mahler, 1975). Peer selfobjects become increasingly important, as well as selfobjects that are less person-represented and more abstract and idea-represented (Chelton & Bonney, 1987). Just so, the elaboration and reworking of the parental images that have formed into images of God or a Higher Power is a lifetime process. The development, or lack of development of parental, God and self images all occur simultaneously. These images change due to interactions with and internalization of new objects, in the form of family, friends, teachers, spouses, and children (Rizzuto, 1979; Meissner, 1984).

Winnicott ties together his theory of normal development, pathology, and the analytic process. Restoration of the self requires that one return to the stages of fixation in the parental relationship. One needs to experience being "held" in a safe, loving environment so that the needs and emotions that were traumatically frustrated can be reexperienced, reworked, and expressed (Winnicott, 1971). The split between the true and false self is healed through the relationship with the analyst. Kohut holds that the person establishes a selfobject transference due to the mirroring by the analyst. Like a normal parental relationship, the analyst will make small failures to mirror empathically. This process, called transmuting internalization, will restore the self as the person increasingly sees the world realistically and generates their own ambitions and ideals (Greenberg & Mitchell, 1983).

A process of self restoration, identified by object relations theorists, may be occurring while working the 12 Steps. Persons in recovery may use the Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) groups and a relationship to a Higher Power to help restore deficits in self development that occurred throughout childhood due to traumatic frustrations in relationship to parents. The person's experience in AA and with their Higher Power would be like an ideal analyst or parent "holding" them. AA and their Higher Power would be experienced as reliable, attentive, responsive, memorable and durable, the necessary qualities of a therapeutic environment, according to Winnicott (1948). The person in a 12 Step Program may develop this relationship with their Higher Power through their new experiences of being "held" by persons within the 12 Step community (sponsors, members, groups, friends) and by the durability of the larger 12 Step

community itself (Chelton & Bonney, 1987; Mack, 1981). The primary curative factor within the 12 Step program is spiritual. This involves developing a relationship with one's Higher Power. A Higher Power can be conceptualized in any way that the person wants, except that it be loving, caring, and greater than one's self (A.A., 1955). For some, the 12 Step group becomes their Higher Power (Mack, 1981).

A main dynamic that occurs in AA and in therapy is the telling of one's story and thus of one's self. Narrative psychology helps explain the process of self restoration that might occur in the person working the 12 Steps. Self is seen as a story (Coles, 1989), and the telling of one's life story assists in the restoration of the self (Howard, 1991). "Identity is a life story ... Like stories, identities may assume a 'good' form - a narrative coherence and consistency - or they may be ill-formed" (McAdams, 1985). Rizzuto (1979) sees the psychoanalytic process of bringing to consciousness the characters in one's life, or one's object representations, as the telling of one's story and the creating of the self. Wyatt (1986) holds that in psychoanalysis the past is not recovered but rather constructed. In recalling the past, the person is not releasing material from repression but is putting their past and their self into meaningful coherence.

Restoration of the self might be facilitated by careful examination of important aspects of the self. Hermans, Kempen, and van Loon (1992) propose that individuals carry on inside themselves continual dialogues with important other people in their lives, usually family, friends, and even purely imaginary figures. This dialogue both constructs self and is the self. The dialogue with parental figures may be the most important for the recovering addict. The parental figures may become symbolized in this dialogue by their Higher Power.

An important process of the 12 Step program is storytelling. Members tell the stories of their lives and recovery. The reconstruction and telling of one's journey is necessary to help one's own and others recovery. It requires that the self be reconstructed and it reconstructs the self (Gorski, 1991). There are three main components to these stories: 1) what the person was like when they were using, during the active phase of their addiction; 2) what happened for them to stop using, often a conversion experience over some time length and the start of working the 12 Steps; and 3) what they are like now that they are well into recovery (A.A. 1955; N.A., 1984).

Method

In-depth interviews were conducted following the hermeneutic model (Packer, 1985; Packer & Addison, 1989). The hermeneutic model involves the interviewer repeatedly interviewing informants to elicit the depth, context and meaning of their perspective. A circular process occurs in which the interviewer repeatedly enters, exits, and re-enters the informant's world. After each interview, the interviewer reviews notes and tapes to develop an understanding of the informant's world, which is then presented to the informant for clarification and elaboration. A spiraling of greater understanding occurs, by both interviewer and informant. This method was chosen because of its potential for identifying and elaborating the complex process of self-restoration.

Thirteen persons were interviewed who had been actively participating in an AA 12 Step program for at least three years and had at least three years of sobriety. They ranged from 3-16 years of sobriety, averaging 8 1/2 years. They varied in age from 31-58 years. Eleven were of European-American descent, one was Arab-American, and one was Asian-American. Nine were male and four were female. They were all employed full time and were of middle class income level. Three interviews were conducted with each person, eliciting as much of the recovering person's story, in their own words, as possible.

Findings

The experiences of these recovering persons will be discussed over several major time periods: childhood, substance abusing period, early recovery and later recovery. An important common factor discovered was that about half of those interviewed had been severely abused (physically, sexually, or emotionally), neglected, and/or severely negatively shamed in childhood by parents or adult males. Their families were described as highly dysfunctional and controlling.

The abuse primarily occurred during childhood and adolescence (or before the substance abuse began). The interviewees then saw God as punishing, threatening, and not caring. Most of them felt an unhealthy shame and were insecure and angry. They had low self-esteem and often displayed codependent behaviors.

Debbie (all names used are pseudonyms), age 36, divorced and with 3 years sobriety, had overly controlling and negatively shaming parents and seemed to closely intermix God and father images:

I was raised in a very strict religious background and was forced to go to church every Sunday. I was

not allowed to date. My dad took me clothes shopping and made me bend over backwards to make sure my underwear didn't show. My dresses had to be to the knee. It was humiliating and embarrassing. No makeup, no high school dances. The pastor in church scared the hell out of me - rock and roll and burn in hell. I blamed God for many years for all the horrible things happening to me ... I got pregnant when I was 18 and I was sent to a maternity home. My parents were ashamed and didn't visit. They didn't want the family to find out. That's when this conception of God totally turned me off. This was very traumatic. I gave birth all alone ... I had a very controlling father. My mom was a practicing alcoholic, a closet drinker. I never knew that growing up.

In describing her childhood, Mary, 40, married and with 8 years sobriety, stated that:

We had an excellent, middle class, white, Christian, suburban family, and a maniac for a dad ... He was mean ... a bully ... And this Catholic God didn't make it any better. They were sending me to a Catholic priest and a Catholic psychologist. My father just kept saying "fix her, she's the problem."

Nearly everyone abused substances to cover the very shame and pain from their substance abusing, and from other destructive behaviors they performed during these years. In addition to this, most of those abused in childhood used substances to cover the pain of their parental abuse. Betty, 35, single and with 11 years sobriety, realized at the time she first drank and used drugs that she would continue substance use because "the minute I got high, the shame went away, and I knew that instant that I needed to continue to get high, because the [sexual] abuse hadn't stopped yet." Betty was molested as a child by her grandfather for 4 years. She met her father for the first time when she was 13. He was an addict, recently released from prison. During that first visit, he got her drunk and then molested her. Betty thought that molesting was men's way of expressing love. If a man validated her for anything, she made him her god. She thought God let men molest her and that God did not hear her cries for help because she was a small, unimportant child while God was big.

Some also abused themselves and other people. Bob began alcohol and drug abuse at age 10. He also sold drugs, and his relationships with others involved primarily getting control over them, being on top, and trying to get whatever he could from them. The way Bob, 41, married and with 10 years sobriety, dealt with his feelings was that he, "put on a steel coat so that nothing could hurt. And the truth was that inside I hurt so f---ing bad that I thought I'd explode if I showed how much I hurt." He thought that if people really knew him, they wouldn't want him.

During the years of substance abusing, those who had been abused as children were often very angry at their fathers, while some were angry primarily at their mothers. They felt angry or abandoned by God, blamed God for their problems, and saw God as a punisher. They continued to feel shameful, alone, fearful, angry, depressed and hated themselves. They were self centered and isolating from other people. Three of the women, Betty, Mary and Debbie, who shared many other similar characteristics, repeatedly allowed themselves to be abused by boyfriends or males. Betty describes how she used to make men her god:

A lot of the men I cared about molested me because I knew that if I did certain things I could get attention that I couldn't get from women ... Men used to give me a reason to wake up in the morning, to put on my make-up, to get dressed. I didn't know I was lovable without a man.

During the early stages of recovery, relationships with their parents generally improved primarily because of changes the recovering persons made in themselves. Joseph, 30, single and with 5 years sobriety, and who had been often badly beaten by his father, recalled his experience:

One of the hardest things to admit in my inventory was that I hated my dad. I confronted him, and that was hard. It was hard admitting to my dad about my alcohol. He cried. It was only the second time I'd seen him cry. He felt that he failed. But the family changed. Now they're real open and we have a good relationship.

Most of those who had childhood abuse also had to confront their parents for the relationships to improve. For some of them, however, neither they nor their parents changed in their relationships with each other.

In terms of their relationships with God or a Higher Power, most persons during early recovery had problems relating to God. They still had the images and experiences of God that they had while abusing substances. These problems were broken through in various ways, often by seeing others believe in God and by realizing that God had always been present. Images of God began to develop such as like a new life, spark, comforter, father, conscience, and becoming a better self.

All of them had negative self images in early recovery. For a variety of reasons these self images

changed and they had decreased feelings of grandiose self importance and wanting to control others. The three similar females however continued in abusive relationships with boyfriends. When Mary started dating, she was uncomfortable dating men who treated her well and were stable and in recovery. At age 14 she had started in prostitution, which included rapes and beatings.

Most of these persons interviewed, during early recovery, did not understand or use the 12 Steps at first. The reason for this is unclear, but eventually the Steps became for some a structure, process and guide. The most significant Steps were often 3-7 and 9. These involved letting go, feeling pain, revealing secrets and shame, working on character defects, and making amends.

The most important aspects for them of the AA fellowship were identifying with others in AA, their relationships with sponsors, getting support and love, and the group's belief in a Higher Power. Philip, 53, single and with 6 1/2 years sobriety, described it vividly:

I had never been to an AA meeting. My sponsor took me to one, and they were happy, laughing. It was electrifying. At first I thought they were being happy because they wanted me to join their club, and wait till they find out I didn't have any money. Everyone was coming over to me and talking to me and asking my name and were glad I was there. They gave me unconditional love. I felt terrific. I don't remember feeling that before. There were always conditions.

During his 30 years of alcohol and drug abuse, Philip was angry at God and blocked him out. His parents and older brother all died of alcoholism while Philip was growing up. Though raised a practicing Catholic, Philip stopped practicing at age 18 and became agnostic. He believed there was a God, but thought God didn't care about him. He blamed God instead of looking at himself.

During his first 1½ years of sobriety, Philip made the AA group his Higher Power. He trusted the group - he didn't trust God. The group kept him sober. However, while doing his 4th Step inventory, in which he reviewed everyone in his past life with whom he had to make amends, he realized that his addiction wasn't about God, it was about himself.

Important psychological dynamics that facilitated early recovery for most of these persons interviewed included becoming aware of the destructive behavior patterns that they repeated, and working through pain in therapy. For most, a mixture of hospital programs, psychotherapy, working the 12 Steps, AA membership and other influences were usually helpful, complementary, interacting, and important to their early recovery.

In later recovery, those who had not had childhood abuse had resolved all or most of their issues with their parents, were generally in less conflict with themselves, and tended to embrace character defects as parts of who they were. The others were still struggling with abuse issues and had mostly not resolved their parental relationships.

Mostly all of them while in later recovery were ambivalent or negative toward traditional religions and traditional God images. They had a variety of ways of experiencing God such as by doing God's will, letting go of control, changing character defects, serving others, and by seeing God as like new life or as God revealing himself. These images and experiences were much broader and richer than they had in early recovery.

The 12 Steps were used by most of them in two ways. The first was as tools, a structure, and a guide which is internalized. This frequently involves turning everything over to God, taking frequent inventories, and making amends. The second way was as a spiritual program. Essential elements are turning one's will over to God, letting go and saying the Serenity Prayer. AA for most was a place to receive support and acceptance, to help others (especially newcomers), to nurture spirituality, and an informal support system. Some of them nurtured their recovery primarily through maintenance strategies such as attending meetings, daily review of self, and avoiding alcoholic behaviors. Those who had had childhood abuse in addition often needed psychotherapy still for past pain and abuse issues.

Discussion

There are five issues which will now be discussed. The first is that abusive parental relationships in childhood strongly contributed to negative God, parent and self images. The second issue is how the emotion of shame, which is a primary and common emotion among substance abusers, strongly affects these interconnected images. Working through shame is an important aspect of recovery. Third, how the change processes of AA, the 12 Steps, psychotherapy and spirituality are interconnected will be addressed. The fourth topic is of spirituality and its interaction with parental relationship changes. Finally, additional counseling implications will be discussed.

Effects of parental relationships upon images of God, parents and self

Those who suffered severe abuse or neglect in childhood also had parents who were shaming and controlling. They had images of God as threatening, punishing and abandoning. Their feelings and self images contained much shame, anger, insecurity, co-dependence and low self esteem. These recovering persons frequently intertwined references to God, childhood religion, parents, and abuse. It was often hard for them to separate them out. Indeed, they resisted separation, yet it was helpful to do so to see the differences between them. Like a rubber band, these references would separate out unwillingly, but the moment one stopped pulling, they would snap back together again.

God images were primarily to God the Father, not to Jesus or the Holy Spirit. Rarely was a reference made to a motherly God image, or to Mary. This is somewhat surprising, given the importance of the mother in the development of the personality of the child. But childhood abuse much more frequently is perpetrated by fathers, stepfathers, and other males.

After childhood abuse and parental toxic shaming and controlling, addiction followed for many. This does not necessarily imply a causal relationship. The study was limited to those who in fact had become substance abusers. It did not study persons who had been abused as children but did not develop addictions.

Shame

Shame emerged as a common and significant emotion among persons with substance abuse. Toxic shame is negative and involves self denigration, guilt, feeling bad, ugly, not good enough and hateful toward the self. Healthy shame can help one be aware of their limitedness, change, and grow (Bradshaw, 1988; Whitfield, 1987). One's basic sense of goodness or connection to the human community is not threatened. Toxic shame creates further shame.

Toxic shame was a dominant emotion in their childhoods, due to parental abuse. All those interviewed did not identify their parents' negative shaming as primary contributors to their later substance abuse, but for all, shame also developed throughout their substance abusing years. The shame stemmed from both abusing substances and from performing other destructive behaviors, such as sexual promiscuity, failures in school, jobs and relationships, etc. It was not clearly identified by them if this was a healthy sense of shame which encouraged them to stop substance abuse and other destructive behaviors. This shame, although having some different roots, seemed to put the informants at similar experiences of pain. This pain would become an important contributor to their recovery as they would be able to identify with each other around shared shame and pain.

The substance abuse research literature has noted the influence of abusive parenting upon poor self-object development and later substance abuse (Chelton & Bonney, 1987). What is not well developed and what this study supports is how God images interact with parent and self image development among substance abusers. Those abused during childhood tended, during their substance abusing years, to have anger toward their parents, especially their fathers. They continued to feel abandoned and angry at God, blamed God, and saw God as a punisher. Their shame and anger toward self and parents appeared to be projected onto God. The reason for this projection may be related to Winnicott's (1971) idea of the transitional object, that area in between self and parent in which images of God are played with. Perhaps this is where feelings of shame and anger then are also played with. Sometimes the child may accept the shame from the parent. Sometimes the child may react in anger and give the shame back to the parent. Perhaps sometimes the child is not sure which to do and so projects the shame and anger onto God, who resides in the transitional space. Regardless, shame invariably becomes a primary emotion for substance abusers to address in recovery.

Interconnection of change processes

Identification of the processes that contribute to change was a major goal of this study. Different aspects of the person and their experience in recovery interacted and contributed to development of God, parent and self images.

Relating to one's sponsor was key to long term growth and change. Those with childhood abuse histories more frequently identified the support and love of the general AA group rather than their sponsor as helpful to their recoveries. Most did not at first understand the 12 Steps, nor utilize them fully. They did not even differentiate between the 12 Steps and AA. Working the 12 Steps effectively, as written in the Big

Book, can only be done in the context of an AA group. The Steps become meaningful only through interacting and talking with other people in AA. The Steps are not effective as a purely cognitive exercise that can be read and learned in isolation from interacting with others. It seems that AA and the 12 Steps can only be understood in combination with each other and other change processes. In addition to attending AA, most of those interviewed had participated in some additional treatment programs. In telling the stories of their recoveries, they usually did not differentiate between the learning and change that occurred in each of these different programs. Each complemented and reinforced one another.

The 12 Steps do not acknowledge and address childhood abuse issues. This may impair recovery for many who do not identify their childhood abuse. Most observed that acknowledging their pain and toxic shame from their childhood abuse and/or from abusing substances was a major turning point in their early recovery. Their opinion was that many of those who drop out of AA do so because they do not deal with their pain and shame. Therapy may be needed to complement the 12 Steps for many recovering persons.

In this study what emerged as the primary process that initiates change in God images for substance abusers was experiences with others in AA. Newcomers identify with others in AA and feel understood, accepted and loved. This was especially important because toxic shame causes cut off from self and others. The newcomer realizes that they must do what the other AA members have done in order to obtain sobriety and serenity: develop a relationship with God. To do this they often rely on the group trust in God, or trust in the group itself as a Higher Power. For some, faith develops in a more individual way, through increased understanding or awareness or personal spiritual experiences. A relationship with God was not forced upon them by the group. They had to make a conscious decision to be open to this.

Spirituality and parental relationships

Changes in relations to parents while in early recovery interacted with the other changes occurring. Cognitive shifts in God images are needed to change parental relations. In recovery, a relationship with a Higher Power must begin. A primary God image among persons in recovery is that of letting go of control to a Higher Power. But because of toxic shame, substance abusers try to control everything in their lives, to prevent further shaming and pain. The need for control is rooted in parental abuse, and they associate their parents with their images of God. The love, support and consistency of people in AA provide corrective relationships. New persons in recovery can feel understood, accepted and parented healthily, and can let go of control. They can consider the possibility that God can be like these people in AA. Cognitive shifts in images of a Higher Power can then develop. They can break the cycle of these negative interconnected God, parent and self images. All of these associations and images are interconnected and interacting, and all must change for recovery to occur. The point of change can be any of the images. A change in one image has a ripple effect, causing changes in all the other images. These changes may come slowly or quickly.

Education is also an important initiator of change. Most of these persons interviewed learned in treatment about family dynamics and roles and about alcoholism as a family disease. This education helped them make cognitive shifts in their understandings about their parents. They described their relations with their parents as changing slowly during recovery. Another influence for change in parental relations was that the recovering person often developed new sources of love and support in AA, and often parental-like relationships with sponsors.

At least half of the interviewees had compulsively controlling parents. These parents taught that control is a basic approach to life, a way to live and to relate to others and self. These persons interviewed had learned as children and teenagers that life is approached and problems dealt with through compulsively controlling events, other people, and self. A major way that spirituality influenced change for persons in recovery was that they had to learn new values and a new philosophy to deal with self and others. This involved acceptance of events, letting go and surrender of control.

The interviewees had to learn how to set boundaries and limits with themselves and others. They learned to set boundaries with their parents; to clarify these roles as adult relationships and no longer as childhood relationships; and to express their feelings and needs to their parents clearly. Recovering persons learn to do this in other relationships also, particularly with abusive partners. They learn to do this in relationship to God, understanding God as one who will listen and understand. Informant Betty, a long term molestation survivor described, "I wanted a safe relationship with God."

For those who were severely abused as children, feeling pain, shame and anger in early recovery usually led to confrontation with parents. This helped them make the shift from victim, dependent, passive,

punished, and shameful to assertive, responsible, feeling, expressive, a survivor, and in healthy control. This confrontation, however, occurred in conjunction with the person's decision to change self, by making the cognitive shifts and understanding the parts he/she played in the family dynamics and parent/child relationship. Some of these changes are outlined in Table 1.

In childhood, they had no choice in their parents' controlling and abuse. As adult substance abusers, they continued to give their parents control by being controlled by substances. They numbed themselves to their hurt, anger and shame. In recovery, they felt their hurt, anger and shame. They stopped abusing themselves or letting themselves be abused, stopped blaming their parents and God, and regained control of self. They symbolized this change by giving control to God, accepting the will of their Higher Power, the ideal parent who exercises healthy and balanced control. The ideal parent knows that the child can exercise control and can have choices within a range of options. The ideal parent provides guidance, protection, and comfort without punishment.

Other implications for practice

Counselors might help recovering persons tie together the resolution of God, parent, and self images. Helping clients work on one of these images may facilitate work on the others images. Client strengths in some of these relationships can lead to further progress in the others. Clients can carry on a dialogue with their internalized parent or Higher Power, to rework negative associations of parents, God and self with abuse and toxic shaming.

Parents can increase their understanding of their roles in developing children's spiritual lives. Their relationship with their child will greatly influence how the child constructs God, parent and self images, develops trust in the world, and develops a sense of a power greater than self. Counselors can address this in therapy and in parenting classes.

A recovering person who had childhood abuse may experience difficulty developing trust of a counselor whom they see as a parental figure. The negative parent and God images may be transferred onto the counselor. In this study, those who had been abused as children identified the group love and support as more helpful than AA sponsor relationships. Group therapy would be a modality then to consider.

The shame from negative behaviors the person performed during substance abusing years must be differentiated from the toxic shame from parental abuse in childhood. Persons in early recovery should be encouraged to find others, perhaps in AA, with whom they can identify, to help normalize the experience of shame and abuse. The counselors should carefully assess whether there has been childhood abuse, and help the recovering person work through feelings and identity around the abuse. Counselors should know which Step of the 12 Steps the client is working. They can provide additional careful support around the 4th Step, when issues of abuse often lead to relapse.

Reworking God images can facilitate working through toxic shame, pain and anger of abuse. As already mentioned, God images may lie in the transitional space between self and parent images. The pain, toxic shame and anger that the person has not resolved can be temporarily placed onto God, in the transitional space. The recovering person can look at the shame there, grow in understanding of it, confront parents with it, and eventually release it. In the transitional space the shame can be symbolized and managed. The use of symbols and rituals can be encouraged by counselors.

Conclusion

Childhood abuse and negative parental relationships often have long lasting effects upon many persons with substance abuse or in recovery. Their God, parent, self and other images become strongly affected by the emotions of toxic shame, pain and anger. These emotions and images are important influences in the recovery process. Shame can be from childhood abuse and from one's other destructive behaviors during substance abusing periods. Toxic shame from abuse often needs addressed outside of 12 Steps, in therapy.

Change in God, parent and self images occur interactively. Individual persons in AA are often the initial change agents upon these images, but influences of the 12 Steps and counseling become important early in recovery. God, parent and self images are often negative in early recovery but can grow and develop positively within several weeks or months of recovery. Counselors can facilitate the reworking of God, parent and self images.

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John Robison received both his PhD in counseling psychology and MSW degrees from UCLA. As a licensed clinical social worker, he has counseled in substance abuse and psychiatric inpatient and outpatient settings. He is currently teaching in the Social Work Department of California State University Long Beach and is a member of the Association of Christian Therapists.

	childhood or before substance abuse	adult with substance abuse	adult in recovery
God	punishing distant	punishing or absent	comforter companion
control of life by	parent	substance abuse	self and God
feelings	felt and repressed	numbed out	felt and expressed

Comment on John Robison

Charles L. Zeiders, Psy.D.
110 North Aberdeen Ave.
Wayne, PA 19087

Dr. Robison's article took us on a journey from early, destructive object-relations experiences, through the development of addiction, to the recovery of sobriety and life-enriching self, other and God representations. As he clarified "how psychological and spiritual dynamics interact to promote healing and restoration of self," we followed his discussion closely and used his points to hone our own thinking about recovering from shame.

Robison draws on object relations theorists to show that formative experiences with parents determine object representations. Drawing mostly on the insights of Self Psychology, he establishes that children develop images of their parents' responses to them: If Mom smiles at me, I am lovable; if she frowns, I am bad. Robison also touched upon the fact that early object relations have a cognitive aspect. Mom's smile, in other words, not only becomes an image within the object relations system, it becomes part of a belief network. While a psychodynamic therapist would argue that the child's early parental experiences create a series of images that become psychological reference points that determine behavioral and affective components of relational systems, a cognitive-behaviorist would emphasize that these first relational experiences create structures of belief about self, world, and others around which the subject will organize his or her world.

In the etiology of addiction, the early relational environment is such that pathological interaction with caregivers makes it impossible to establish the preponderance of healthy object representations and positive beliefs necessary for thriving. In the case of abuse, Robison notes, damage to the object relations system is especially devastating. Punishing and controlling, the abusive parents repeatedly mirror the child in such a way that the child develops object representations as malevolent, exploitive, mad, cruel, and so forth. These representations leak into the Image of God, who becomes, in Robison's findings, "punishing, threatening, and not caring." From these contaminated object representations emerges the budding addict's organizing cognition: The folks on heaven and earth treat me like I am worthless, and they may be right.

This last point speaks to the disastrous effect of abuse on the self image and the beliefs that govern it. Caught in a relational universe wherein both God and man mirror the child with scowls, anger, meanness, and neglect, the tormented child's primitive conclusion about the self can only be: I am a shame. The child sees itself through the eyes of the abusive and the contemptuous. The child imagines itself as the miserable object it saw in the eyes of its accusers. The tiny cognitive apparatus has no data point other than the blows, the senseless punishment, and the contemptuous sneers. S/he is as s/he is mirrored. Intellect can only ratify the loathsome self image: I am a shame. Behavior lines up behind the self image. Pointless rebellion or passive despair become the behavioral manifestations of the wounded self image. The shamed struggle to compensate for the core image through accomplishment, attention seeking, closeness, and avoidance. Inevitably the defensive projects fail and the outrageous humiliation connected to the core self reinforces the relentless conclusion: I am a shame.

Such self experience is intolerable. Over the course of development the subject find that certain experiences modify the intolerable experience of being. Among these are alcohol, drugs, perhaps sex. Just as a child might seek a steady supply of narcissistic gratification from Mom, Dad and God, the addict seeks a steady supply of shame reductive experiences through the addictive substance or experience. As addiction progresses the functionality of the defensive project becomes less and less supportable due to interpersonal, health, and legal problems. Healing becomes the next project. Recovery begins.

The 12 Step fellowship offers a wide variety of corrective experiences. What we find especially moving is Robison's observation that newcomers to AA begin to "feel understood, accepted and loved." The recovering person has the opportunity to see himself or herself through the eyes of the loving fellowship. As the love of others steadily contradicts the shameful self identification, the self identification begins to transfigure. The coeval emergent cognition is: I am lovable. Having this new frame of reference, the recovering person finds new ways of organizing experience with others and God. The redemptive

experience of love becomes possible with God and others, and the healing of the shameful self identifications and cognitions proceeds.

Robison's findings are rich and discussion could take many courses before the richness of his data is exhausted. We appreciate his work and offer our remarks on how therapeutic love changes the self image and changes the object relations scenario with others and God.

Charles Zeiders, Psy.D., practices at the Institute for Christian Counseling and Therapy near West Chester, PA. A specialist in the interplay between religion and psychology, Dr. Zeiders wrote his doctoral dissertation on the science and phenomenology of energy medicine. His academic articles have treated the impact of prayer in the clinical setting, psychosomatics, and other interesting topics. He is pioneering the use of contemplative prayer for the treatment of anxiety.

Sharon's Christmas Prayer

She was five,
sure of the facts,
and recited them
with slow solemnity,
convinced every word
was revelation. She said
they were so poor
they had only peanut butter and jelly sandwiches to eat
and they went a long way from home
without getting lost. The lady rode
a donkey, the man walked, and the baby
was inside the lady.
they had to stay in a stable
with an ox and an ass (hee-hee)
but the Three Rich Men found them
because a star lited the roof,
Shepherds came and you could
pet the sheep but not feed them.
Then the baby was borned.
And do you know who he was?
Her quarter eyes inflated
to silver dollars.
The baby was God.
And she jumped in the air,
whirled round, dove into the sofa,
and buried her head under the cushion
which is the only proper response
to the Good News of the Incarnation.

*from The Hour of the Unexpected
by John Shea
2100 N Lincoln Park West
Apt 3B South
Chicago, IL 60614*