

Your Resentments



Part A - Discovery: What Have You Become?

INTRODUCTION

“In AA we slowly learned that something had to be done about our vengeful resentments, self-pity, and unwarranted pride. We had to see that every time we played the big-shot, we turned people against us. We had to see that when we harboured grudges and planned revenge for such defeats, we were really beating ourselves with the club of anger we had intended to use on others. We learned that if we were seriously disturbed, our first need was to quiet that disturbance, regardless of who or what we thought caused it.”¹

This quotation emphasises the difference between resentments and anger (we cover anger in another module). This week we see how you use ‘the club of anger’ on yourselves. In the anger module you see how you use that club on others. Let’s start with a statement; addicts are always the victims of their own resentments.

¹AA Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions p47

“Few people have been more victimised by resentments than have we alcoholics. It mattered little whether our resentments were justified or not.”² Resentments smoulder within you. They get deeper and more frequent the longer *you* are in addiction. “Our disease isolated us from people except when we were getting and using, and finding ways and means to get more. Hostile, resentful, self-centred and self-seeking, we cut ourselves off from the outside world.”

The Alcoholic Anonymous (AA) Big Book says: “Resentment is the number one offender. It destroys more alcoholics than anything else. From it stems all forms of spiritual disease...” If you made a habit of developing resentments in your life before you entered the Bridge Program, you will also find people, places and things to resent in the Bridge Program.

A) What are your resentments, past and present?

²AA Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions p90

The 'Advantages' Of Resentments

Oddly enough, resentments do have advantages. Otherwise you as *addicts* wouldn't bother having them. You use resentments to get some of your needs met because you don't yet know better methods that are less self-destructive.

Resentments meet two needs for you:

- (1) Your need to find and develop your personal identity and meaning in life.
- (2) Your need for self-acceptance.

Resentments, as forms of anger, are emotional responses to situations. But the spiritual aspect is the most critical as resentments harm you spiritually. "It is plain to us that a life which includes deep resentment leads only to futility and unhappiness...For when harbouring such feelings we shut ourselves off from the sunlight of the spirit. The insanity of alcohol returns and we drink again."

The solution to resentments is also spiritual. We'll get to that in Part B.

(B) Do you think you're better than the person you resent the most (be very honest here!)? Could that be why you keep the resentment?

(1) YOUR NEED TO FIND A PERSONAL IDENTITY AND MEANING IN LIFE.

Chris's Story

Chris was continuously beaten by his mother's boyfriend Barry from age five to nine. He is now 21 and has not seen Barry for 12 years, when Barry deserted them. Chris deeply resents Barry, he hates him, he hates himself. Almost every day he thinks of the harm done to him by Barry. Chris is now a heroin addict. One day Chris meets a magician who says to him: "If you wish I can change reality, so that you never had a step-father named Barry and he never beat you."

Chris protests: "But that would be fantasy, It wouldn't be reality. I did have a step-father named Barry. He did beat me." the magician asks: "Where do you think you've been living for the past 12 years since Barry left your life?"

Chris thinks for a while. Then he exclaims: "I don't want to live in fantasy anymore! But Barry did exist and did beat me. You must not change that reality." "I won't change that reality," says the magician "I'll just put Barry and his beatings where in reality they exist, in the past. I'll do this by taking away your present resentment against him."

Again Chris protests: "But then I'll be nothing. For 12 years I have been Barry's victim. What else am I?" As the magician disappears into the mist, he mutters: "reality is unbelievable!" Later that day Chris overdoses on heroin. He's rescued by the ambos. They revive him; Chris then resents them for spoiling his reality.

Let's make some observations about this story. *Firstly*, Barry really was an abusive man. He physically beat Chris for four years. Chris has 'right' on his side.

(C) When you resent, do you have 'right' on your side? Would letting the resentment go seem like admitting you were wrong?

A second observation is that today Chris hates both Barry and himself. Barry has not been in his life for 12 years, so he turned his hatred on himself. One of the ways Chris coped with the beatings was by convincing himself that he somehow deserved them. This is a toxic shame response. He knew in his head that he did not deserve the beatings, but he felt he must be to blame. Chris then took this shame response into the present: he deserves punishment today.

Yet no-one is punishing him today. So he punishes himself through drug abuse (in part). That's how toxic shame works. All along Chris's head tells him he didn't deserve Barry's punishment then, or his self-punishment now. Yet his head is not in charge. His shameful feelings are. For 12 years Chris has been living in a fantasy. And when you're living in a fantasy, head knowledge doesn't count.

Thirdly, Chris 'thinks of the harm done to him by Barry nearly every day. This is the identity issue. Chris finds his identity, and then refines it. He finds his identity as 'victim of Barry' there-and-then. He then refines this identity in his journey to here-and-now until 'victim of Barry' simply becomes 'victim'. The Barry element drops out. Chris removes Barry out of his identity in the same way that a refinery removes impurities from raw sugar to produce 'pure' sugar. Barry is not present here-and-now. He still thinks about Barry, but it is those thoughts rather than Barry himself that leads to his present resentment. Notice the way Chris's thoughts caused his feelings.

(D) Do you sometimes hate yourself almost as much as you hate the person you resent? What makes you feel bad today: the bad things that happened in the past, or your present thoughts about those bad things?

Once the child Chris identified himself as Barry's victim, he gradually refined his identity into being *anyone's* victim during his journey to adulthood. Here-and-now Chris sees himself as victim of all sorts of present day injustices. He holds much resentment, such as against the ambos. By the law of averages sometimes he is someone's innocent victim. More often he is in situations where he's no-one's victim. He doesn't notice these situations because they don't fit his self-identity, nor his meaning in life. Chris sees the world as victimising him, not because the world is, but because he is victimising himself.

Your sense of meaning in life flows from your self-identity. If you see yourself as a victim, then you will see the world as full of injustices and full of people out to victimise you. You will see your purpose in life as discovering and avenging all these injustices. Some of you may even go further and become victims for others by 'taking on board' issues that really concern others more than you. We repeat here the words of the Jewish *Talmud* that we have used in other modules; you perceive the world, not as it is, but as you are.

(E) Where have you ended up? Are you constantly feeling victimised by present day injustices?

This brings us to a *fourth* observation in Chris's story. He doesn't want the magician to end his resentments. This reality might seem unbelievable (as it does to the magician), but it is still Chris's reality. After a spiritual journey, Chris might get rid of his victim identity and discover a different and more realistic reality. That new reality would be: we cannot live here-and-now if we are still living there-and-then. One of the reasons some of you hold onto your resentments against childhood wrongdoers is that *those resentments have given you an identity*, the *only* identity that you have. They enabled you to *find* an identity. Then you spent years *refining* it. You became victims.

Your meaning in life is now to fight against victim-hood, *but never so successfully as to stop being a victim*. After all that work in developing *one* meaning and identity, you fear having to construct *another* meaning and identity! Then you hide this fear with your resentments! You therefore hold onto them like valuable possessions, which is what they are for you.

(F) What do you see in Chris's story that is relevant to you? (similarities - differences.)

(2) The Need To Develop Self-Acceptance.

JASON'S STORY

Jason is a 25-year-old practising Christian, who helps little old ladies across the street on his way to his regular bottle shop. He's an alcoholic. For three months he's been at the Recovery Centre. He was bailed there by the court pending sentencing after his third drink-driving conviction and his fourth assault conviction. He pleaded guilty. He always does. He's an honest sort of guy. Until a few weeks ago Jason and another client named Frank were good friends and shared a room. It was the best room in the Centre. Although they both smoked, only Frank smoked in their room. This was against the rules. One day there was a room inspection, and evidence of in-room smoking was discovered. Since it was not obvious who was responsible and since Frank didn't own up, they were both penalised. Had Frank been honest he would have been punished more severely than the punishment they both received, and Jason would have received no penalty. But Frank was not an honest sort of guy.

Jason was furious with Frank over his dishonesty and deeply resented him. They began to argue all the time. He could not stand his room mate anymore and asked that Frank be moved, since Jason had the room first. In fact it was Jason who was moved. He was mad. Frank was happy. Jason's resentment with Frank grew.

A week ago Jason was in the breakfast line, Frank happened to be serving. Jason saw that his bacon was half the size of everybody else's. He hit the roof. So did his plate of bacon and eggs. He threatened to place the plate in a part of Frank's anatomy where it was not meant to go. He gave Frank a fat lip. He was discharged. His bail was revoked.

Jason now sits in a remand cell resenting Frank more than ever. He has heard that Frank may bring an assault charge against him. If this happens Jason will plead guilty. He always does. He's an honest sort of guy.

Jason had 'right' on his side over the original smoking-in-the-room incident. Therefore he became self-righteous when Frank didn't own up. Jason had a tendency to be self-righteous anyway. He was critical of many people around him. He felt morally superior to them. This moral superiority substituted for self-acceptance: "I may not be much, but at least I'm better than them."

Like most addicts Jason had low self-esteem. The only way he could accept himself was to notice conduct in other people that he wouldn't do himself. He was particularly big on the honesty issue. He used his resentments to convince himself that he was more honest than most. That made him feel morally superior to people he saw as being dishonest. In a distorted sort of way this helped him 'accept' himself. "I may not be much," he says as he sits in his remand cell, "but at least I am better than Frank".

Of course the reality is that Jason is fooling himself. He might say he's a Christian, but he's not spiritual in all his affairs. Only in some of them. He takes one virtue - honesty with others - to extreme and forgets the rest. In particular, he's not being self-honest. He might be kind to little old ladies and honest with others, but bashing people is not spiritual. Nor is self-abuse through alcohol abuse. Nor is drink-driving. Nor is focussing on the sizes of bacon slices and therefore going to gaol. This suggests a lack of balance.

Unlike Chris, Jason does not see himself as anyone's victim. Instead he bashes them. He uses resentments to focus on the moral shortcomings of others. He hates seeing Frank get away with being dishonest with others. Yet he gets away with being dishonest within himself by focussing on Frank's dishonesty with others. Like Chris he becomes the victim of his resentments. He smiles as he gives old ladies a helping hand. He snarls as he gives Frank a fat lip. That's dishonesty. He lives in fantasy. He needs to get real.

(G) Are any parts of Jason's story relevant to you? (similarities - differences.)

Your Resentments

Part B - Recovery: What Are You Going To Do About It?

False Ideas About Forgiveness

For some of you the idea of forgiveness may cause more hostility and resentment. Yet it is only through forgiveness of others that you reduce the harm to yourself of resentments. Think of the stars and the sun. When you forgive, the wrongs done to you become like the stars. In their own space and time they are huge, but in your space and time they are tiny. They don't hurt you now. When you resent, the wrongs done to you become like the sun. You give them space and time in your here-and-now, and their intensity scorches you until you become hard and bitter.

(H) What about you? How have your resentments made you hard and bitter?

Let's look at seven false ideas about forgiveness that may be getting in your way.

You don't have to forget in order to forgive. Therefore you can't use your inability to forget as a reason not to forgive. Sometimes, not always, you will forget *after* you forgive, but that's a bonus. It was unrealistic for Chris to forget that he had been beaten repeatedly by Barry. That's why he didn't like The magician's first suggestion to remove Chris's memory of the beatings. On the other hand, if Jason had forgiven Frank over the smoking-in-the-room drama, he might have forgotten that incident. Then he would not have 'lost it' over that undersized bacon rasher!

False Idea (2): Forgiveness Is A Feeling

Forgiveness is a choice, not a feeling. You can make a decision to forgive while still feeling the resentment. *Afterwards* the resentment feeling *gradually* goes away. You don't have to wait until the feeling goes away *before* you forgive. If Chris forgave Barry, it would still take a long time for his resentment feeling to go away, but it *would* go away. It won't go away *until after* he forgives. This is why forgiveness is spiritual. It involves doing something that is unnatural for you: forgiving when you don't feel like it.

(J) What about you? Do you see that you need to forgive before the resentment feeling will go away, not after that feeling goes away?

False Idea (3): The Wrongdoer Must Deserve Forgiveness

Forgiveness has nothing to do with the wrongdoer's past acts or present regrets. It is about letting go of the wrongdoer's present effect on us. *We deserve the release* that flows from *letting go*, regardless of what the wrongdoer deserves. By refusing to forgive, you hurt *yourself*, not the wrongdoer. The insanity of this should be clear. This is why The magician said Chris lived in Fantasy for 12 years. Chris's resentment was insane. And insanity is only 'allowed' in Fantasy. Chris had magically given Barry power in his mind: that's fantasy. Look where Jason's insane resentment got him.

(K) What about you? Have you refused to forgive because your wrongdoer does not deserve it? Who is hurt most by your refusal?

False Idea (4): Forgiveness Involves Trusting The Wrongdoer Again

Forgiving and trusting are different things. Forgiveness involves letting go of something that hurts you, namely the resentment. Trust involves believing that you will not be hurt again in the same way. Trust, not forgiveness, may have to be earned by the wrongdoer.

After his room change Jason could have forgiven Frank over the first smoking-in-the-room incident without having to trust Frank again.

(L) What about you? Do you now realise that you can forgive your wrongdoer without necessarily having to trust that person again?

False Idea (5): Forgiveness Involves Letting The Wrongdoer Repeat The Wrong

This confusion arises when the victim wants or expects some ongoing relationship with the wrongdoer. He continues to *remind* the wrongdoer of the past wrong in the false belief that this somehow prevents a repeat of the wrong. What it does is frustrate the wrongdoer. He can't win. He can't change his *past* behaviour, but gets no credit for changing his *present* behaviour. Many recovering *addicts* find themselves in this situation when they return to their families.

(M) What about you? Do you refuse to forgive as a way of 'preventing' the wrongdoer repeating the wrong? Have others refused to forgive you for your wrongs even though you're not repeating them? How did you feel?

False Idea (6): Forgiveness Involves Letting Go Of Punishment

Some *addicts* have the idea that holding a resentment punishes the wrongdoer. This is unrealistic and leads to the idea that the wrongdoer is 'living rent-free in our heads'. The wrongdoer is either completely ignorant of the resentment, or is enjoying his awareness that the victim is punishing *himself*. Barry is unaware of Chris's resentment. Frank is happy while Jason is mad.

(N) What about you? Who is 'punished' by your refusal to forgive?

False Idea (7): Forgiveness Involves Minimising The Wrong

Forgiveness is about acknowledging the past wrong but letting go of the power that the *victim had given the wrongdoer* to harm the victim in present time. It is about recognising the difference between the past and present, and choosing to live in the present. The ‘problem’ with this for some *addicts* is that this does indeed allow the original wrong to recede into the past where it belongs. Therefore it will seem smaller and less significant to the victim, after the choice is made to live in the present. The wrong won’t be less significant at the time that it was done, but it will seem less significant from the point of view of the former victim living here-and-now.

This last false idea led to Chris’s refusal of the magician’s offer to put the original wrong place back in the past and to remove Chris’s present resentment. For Chris, as with many *addicts*, the ‘problem’ is that the resentment has become a valuable possession in present time. He doesn’t want it removed. He uses this possession, this resentment, to meet his present need. It confirms his present identity (as victim). If The magician took away the resentment, Chris would be losing part of himself. He would be losing the only identity that had given him significance. He would have to create a new (and better) identity. That would be too much trouble.

This last false idea causes the greatest trouble for you as addicts. You protest that forgiveness involves minimising the *wrong*. Yet your real fear is that letting go of the resentment will minimise *you*. You will be *smaller and less significant* without your resentments. What others did to you in the past is what you have been using to make yourself feel significant now. You’re like people who place too much emotional energy into their cars (or other possessions). If they lose them, they feel smaller. They’re not smaller. They just feel that way. As *Addicts* you put a lot of emotional energy into your resentments (a possession). When you lose them, you feel smaller, less significant. You’re not smaller. You just feel that way.

(O) What about you? Do you hold onto resentments as valuable possessions and fear that letting them go would make you a less significant person?

Forgiveness As A Spiritual Necessity - The Serenity Prayer

As *Addicts* you may come to understand all these false ideas about forgiveness. You may therefore gain a better head knowledge about forgiveness. You may add this to your greater head knowledge about resentments, particularly how they hurt you more than your wrongdoers. All of this may give you wonderful insights. Yet all this information may just stay in your heads. You may go on resenting *anyway*. What a tragedy. What's the problem? What's the solution? The tragedy is that you will relapse. The problem is that you still don't *want* to forgive. The solution is to ask God for help in *wanting* to forgive.

This is where the idea of praying for your wrongdoer comes in. This is why the AA Big Book suggests that you pray for those against whom you hold resentments. "If you will ask in prayer for everything you want for yourself to be given to them, you will be free...Even when you don't really want it for them, and your prayers are only words and you don't mean it, go ahead and do it anyway. Do it every day for two weeks and you will find you have come to mean it and you want it for them, and you will realise that where you used to feel bitterness and resentment and hatred, you now feel compassionate understanding and love."

With persistence these prayers will change *you*, not the wrongdoer. They will help you change your attitude and let go of that which presently harms you, namely the resentment and not the wrong. The acts of others may get you down, but it is your *responsive* resentments that keep you down. Although you don't have the power to change what happened, you do have the power to change your responses. If you don't *want* to use that power, you need God. Ask God for the courage to forgive.



This is also where the Serenity Prayer comes in. Too many addicts think the Serenity Prayer is just something *you say* in recovery. It needs to be something *you do* for recovery. It involves action. All of this forgiveness stuff requires courageous action. This courageous response in the form of forgiveness is a more spiritually rewarding response than resentments.

Some final words of caution are needed. Some childhood injuries leave deep emotional and spiritual scars, especially when sexual abuse is involved. Your response to these injuries may include emotional defence mechanisms. Your recovery involves changing this emotional response. Sometimes the idea quoted in the last paragraphs can be misunderstood as asking God to forgive your wrongdoer. That is not so. That is a cop-out. It is *you* who has to forgive. You may need to do considerable emotional work before you reach the *want* to forgive that is so necessary for your spiritual growth. You do this work with others, including counsellors and therapists. It is beyond the range of these notes. You seek God's help, but it is *you* who do the work. We repeat that we are talking here about deep hurts from childhood and adolescence, not petty resentments that you build up here-and-now.

To go back to our stories one last time, Chris's hurt at the hands of Barry occurred in childhood. Jason's hurt at the hands of Frank occurred in adulthood. Chris may have more work to do than Jason in developing the *want* to forgive. He may need to pray to God for Barry as part of his process of developing the *want* to forgive. Another part of this process may involve emotional therapy. Both could be necessary and neither alone could be sufficient. This is where self-honesty is so essential in recovery.