

and reaching out takes away the shame and the feelings of helplessness. It may be hard for us to admit that we have crossed a boundary, but it is just this type of honesty that heals us and allows us to not drift towards destruction.

As we gain sobriety by having clear boundaries and working our program, it becomes much easier to stay sober and to truly enjoy recovery. As time goes on, and as we work the twelve steps of recovery and grow in our participation in meetings and service, our compulsions and obsessions are progressively lifted. We may then find that behaviors which were acceptable for us when we were new must now be put in the inner circle.

CONCLUSION

Sexual addiction is a cunning and baffling disease. For too long most of us found it familiar, almost comfortable to remain in the cycle of acting out, feeling demoralized, swearing off, and then acting out again. We know from painful experience that it is easy to fool ourselves if that is what we really want to do. How then do we know if we have drawn a functional middle circle or if we are simply deluding ourselves? After all, our "best thinking" got us here in the first place.

Our experience is that if we are rigorously honest with ourselves about our middle circle behavior we will not choose to deceive ourselves into practicing inner circle behavior. In order to stay honest about this, it is necessary to share our program with others. We do not keep our behaviors hidden.

Ultimately, our definition of sobriety is our own, but if we define our own program of recovery in isolation, our selfmade programs may deceive us, becoming too loose or too restrictive.

We write down our recovery program using the three circles as a way to gain clarity. We share our program so that we can gain a balanced recovery and we do this by directly showing our three circles to our sponsor and to people in our group. Without this clarity we can continue to act out, because we are confused about what sobriety is for us.

In S.A.A it is each member's prerogative and privilege to experience his or her own mistakes and joyful successes. From these we discover what we can and cannot do sexually, and progress along the road to a sane and nonaddictive sex life. We believe such a sex life can, "by the grace of God," be enjoyed by all of us, married or single, straight or gay. Obtaining and maintaining abstinence from inner circle compulsions are the bedrock foundation of all the personal growth which will surely follow.

ABOUT THIS PAMPHLET

This pamphlet has been approved by the International Service Organization of SAA, Inc. It is based on literature published and used by the Southern California Intergroup of Sex Addicts Anonymous. Additional ideas were contributed by the Twin Cities Intergroup. We are grateful for this gift of their experience.

ISO of SAA, Inc.

P. O. Box 70949 Houston, Texas 77270

(713) 869-4902

(800) 477-8191 info@saa-recovery.org

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Tri County Recovery

Three Circles Defining Sexual Sobriety in SAA

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SAA

From Shame to Grace

Path to Healing and Recovery

Tel : 1-844-523-8676, ext 10827

info@tcr.p2har.org

THREE CIRCLES

Our primary purpose is to stay sexually sober, to abstain from sexually compulsive behavior, and to carry the message to the sex addict who still suffers. Recovery begins with abstinence from one or more specific sexual compulsions. Having said that, the question arises: How do we define "abstinence" or "sexual sobriety"?

The idea of abstinence is based upon analogy with Overeaters Anonymous. Just as the compulsive overeater does not have to totally give up food, but needs to learn a new approach to food which is non-destructive and non-compulsive, so the sex addict needs to learn a new approach to sex which is non-destructive and non-compulsive.

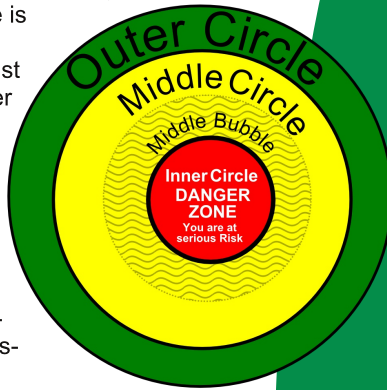
The idea of sexual sobriety is rooted in the heritage of Alcoholics Anonymous which continually reinforces the idea to alcoholics that it is the "first drink" which gets them "drunk." That first drink begins the "phenomenon of craving" which inevitably activates further self-destruction. Similarly our "inner circle" in SAA consists of that behavior which we deem equivalent to the first "drink."

Unlike the alcoholic who, however, must simply "put the plug in the jug," and practice total abstinence from alcohol, most of us have no desire to plug up our sexuality and become totally celibate. For it is not sex in and of itself that causes us problems. It is the various ways we misuse certain kinds of sex that causes us to get "drunk."

Each of us needs to carefully consider which sexual behaviors we are powerless over, which sexual acts lead to feelings of demoralization. These are the addictive behaviors from which we will want to abstain. Each addict has his or her own specific set of compulsions and "triggers" from which it is necessary to abstain. There are sexual behaviors which are acceptable or even experienced with a sense of gratitude and enjoyment. Therefore our program acknowledges each individual's dignity to choose his or her own concept of healthy sexuality.

THE INNER CIRCLE

We have found it simplest to draw a circle. Inside this circle, we write down each one of the compulsive sexual behaviors from which we feel it necessary to abstain. That



will become our "Inner Circle" and everything inside is totally off limits for us. These behaviors are the "drugs" we must stop using, the "alcohol" that gets us drunk and destroys our lives.

One day at a time, we abstain from all behaviors which we have placed in the inner circle and we award chips or medallions for consecutive abstinence from these inner circle behaviors. Many of us may list behaviors such as: anonymous sex, voyeurism, masturbation with pornography, prostitution, sadomasochistic behavior, manipulative or angry sex within a relationship, phone sex, cross-dressing with masturbation, exhibitionism, child sexual abuse or incest.

THE OUTER CIRCLE

Just as there was no question that the behaviors listed in our inner circle were compulsive, addictive, and therefore dangerous and destructive, so there is no question that the behaviors we list in our "outer circle" bring recovery and are to be encouraged, praised and practiced.

That is to say that healthy sexual behaviors are behaviors we choose because they enhance our life, our recovery, and our spiritual connection. Examples of behaviors that some people place in their outer circle are: working the twelve steps, being sexual within a committed relationship - honoring the bond of love that you and your partner have built, masturbation with or without fantasy, enjoying affectionate touch, taking a dance class, playing a sport, wearing beautiful clothing, taking a bath, developing non-sexual friendships with people, developing new healthy interests, dating, and sharing our recovery with other recovering sex addicts.

In short we want to be gentle with ourselves - to practice behaviors that are self nurturing. These outer-circle behaviors are clearly the antithesis of our old way of life, and it is the practice of these actions which will lift our obsessions and compulsions and bring us serenity and joy. Once again, it is important to actually write these down on paper, listing them in an outer circle which is drawn around the inner circle.

THE MIDDLE CIRCLE

We have found that much of our shame is rooted in a kind of merciless perfectionism. Because we are human, we invariably fall short of our lofty ideals, and then sink into a destructive cycle of self-condemnation, shame and eventually, acting out in our inner circle. Such all or nothing thinking permeates our lives and is the

source of much pain and confusion. Many in our program have found recovery only by freeing our minds from the shackles of moralistic perfectionism, learning to embrace our common humanity and avoiding extremes. After all, we are neither gods nor devils, but perpetually imperfect human beings.

The middle circle is where we place behavior of which we are uncertain. Recognizing that we come into this program resentful, afraid, and confused about our sexuality, we know it is not easy to go from inner to outer circle overnight. While the inner circle relates to behaviors which keep us in permanent isolation and fantasy, the outer circle refers to behaviors which help us move out into the real world.

We are all human and ours is a program of progress not perfection. We are trying to move towards a sane sexual ideal, but we have found that one does not rise from the gutter to the heavens in one amazing leap. We do not always know what is good for us and what isn't, nor are we always willing to do the absolute best thing - thus the need for a "middle circle" in which we place those sexual behaviors which fall neither in the category of demoralizing addictions from which we absolutely must abstain, nor in the category of ideal behavior. The point is that we are willing to grow along spiritual lines, and to abstain from some behavior(s). Herein lies the grey areas which in our black and white thinking, we have refused to live with all of our lives.

Within the middle circle, however, there are some behaviors which if not addressed will eventually lead us back to our inner circle. We call these boundary behaviors. Some examples of actions which may be defined as boundary behaviors are: cruising for prostitutes or for a place to practice voyeurism, acting seductively in an inappropriate situation or contacting an old acting out partner in order to renew an addictive sexual relationship.

Crossing a boundary is engaging in a ritual or slippery behavior that may result in acting out. Engaging in boundary behaviors does not change our sobriety date, but because we recognize that our sobriety is jeopardized, we take action to re-connect with the program. If we find that we are engaging in boundary behaviors, we need to respond in a healthy way to take care of ourselves, lest we cross into inner circle behaviors. There are several things we can do: tell an S.A.A member, tell our sponsor, read S.A.A literature or attend an S.A.A meeting and talk about our behaviors. Being accountable

