

MATURITY AND RECOVERY

“Know the truth and the truth will set you free- *but first it will really piss you off*”. I’m not sure where that saying comes from, but it has been my experience. One of the many hard truths that my sponsor shared with me over the years is the fact that real recovery is largely about true inner maturity. I didn’t want to hear this because, firstly, I didn’t want to hear the truth that I was immature, and secondly, I did not want to grow up.

I began using and drinking around the age of 12 and by the time I was 16 or 17 I was a full-blown addict/alcoholic. My heroes were folks like Jimi Hendrix, Jim Morrison, Janis Joplin, Keith Richards and Jerry Garcia. For those youngsters that were not around in the 60’s and 70’s, these were famous rock musicians that were alcoholic/addicts who all died early (except for Keith Richards who found recovery and is still alive). It was my intention to die before I reached the age of 26- that way I would never have to grow up and be responsible. Some call this the ‘Peter Pan Syndrome’.

There are a number of reasons that most if not all addicts/alcoholics have this syndrome:

1. Most mature people learn how to process emotions and feelings in a healthy way as they grow up. Addicts/alcoholics never need to learn this because we use substances to numb out and

block these things. For this reason, I come into recovery with the emotional maturity of the age at which we began using and/or drinking to change the way we felt.

2. We live in a culture that glamorizes youth. It is cool to be young- not so much to be an old person. I don't know about you, but I wanted to be cool and hip- so that meant (in my mind) that I had to remain young. There seemed to be nothing sexy or appealing about growing up.
3. Who wants to be responsible? This was something that I avoided as much as possible.
4. Unprocessed trauma can also block normal maturation. Many alcoholic/addicts have unresolved trauma that affects our ability to grow up like normal folk.

So here I am listening to my sponsor tell me that to recover I need to work towards this thing called 'maturity'. I guess that I ought to spend some time attempting to understand what it is.

I began considering what immaturity is and figured that maturity would simply be the opposite of whatever that was. I thought about the characteristics an infant or toddler. I came up with three, although there are probably more.

1. Little or no tolerance for discomfort.
2. Inability to take personal responsibility.
3. Self-Centeredness

Let's take a moment to look at each of these traits.

1. TOLERATING DISCOMFORT

There are many things that can make us uncomfortable—some are physical (temperature, fatigue, hunger, illness) and more are situational (boredom, frustration, disappointment, fear, loneliness); the list could go on and on. All these are common aspects of everyday life. What differentiates an immature from a mature person is the response to these discomforts. A child is likely to whine, sulk, cry, and/or throw a temper tantrum. An adult who responds in this manner would be called immature.

A child is likely to quit an activity when it becomes difficult, frustrating or boring. A mature person understands the idea of perseverance, commitment, determination and working through challenges. Additionally, the mature adult has the perspective to anticipate the feeling and pride of achievement that comes with the completion of a difficult task.

It is noteworthy that a person can have an 'over-developed' tolerance for discomfort. Such a person can do damage to himself/herself and may have a tendency to stuff feelings that would be healthy to express. This is not maturity- rather it can be martyrdom or low self worth that is reflected in poor self care and/or boundaries.

2. PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY

A young child relies on a parent or caregiver to handle almost of their needs. They must be fed, clothed, cleaned, put to bed and cared for in countless other ways. If they are unhappy they will tend to blame the caregiver for not giving them what they want and are prone to throw a tantrum.

A truly mature person will realize that no one else is responsible for their well-being other than themselves. Such an individual takes ownership in all areas of life including health (physical/emotional/spiritual), finances, relationships, and work. They recognize that their lives are their own creation and do not blame anyone else for unhappiness or difficulties.

An unhealthy pitfall occurs where an individual becomes overly responsible. In this scenario, one takes responsibility for others who ought to be taking care of themselves. This can stunt the growth of the other person and create an unnecessary burden and

dependency on the caretaker. Additionally, a pathologically responsible person might neglect their own need for fun and relaxation resulting in an imbalanced life.

SELF-CENTEREDNESS

Thinking only of ourselves is a characteristic of immaturity. A young child is generally only capable of focusing on his own desires and comfort. He might fret, whine, or throw a tantrum if he does not get what he wants- with little awareness or concern for others around him. The child sees themselves as the center of the universe and acts accordingly.

Such immaturity in an adult can look like narcissism. We may objectify other people and only see them in terms of how they affect us. We might think only of what we can get from others rather than what we can give. This attitude results in all sorts of subtle (and not so subtle) forms of manipulation. Maturity means that we have a true perspective on ourselves- we have the humility to be 'right-sized', yet strive to consider how we might have some positive impact in the lives of others. As Wes Hamil (*Modern Medicine, 2019*) puts it: we ask What's in it *from* me? rather than What's in it *for* me?

Learning to be concerned about others and their needs is a practice that for many of us does not come

naturally. The society that we live in seems to encourage us to focus our attention on getting what we want for ourselves. It is possible that much of our personal difficulties stem from this sort of self-centered immaturity coupled with a sense of entitlement and a demand for immediate gratification.

It was and is important for me to remember that addiction and alcoholism is a disease. I am a sick person working on getting healthy- not a bad person working on being good. With this in mind, I won't be as prone to beating myself up for being immature. I can tell you from my own experience that growing up and learning to be a mature adult after the age of 30 has not been easy and is often embarrassing. This is one of the reasons that I'm grateful for the 10th Step, which suggests that when I am wrong to promptly admit it and make amends where it is called for.

As a final note, it is important to understand the difference between being *childish* and *childlike*. Being childish is synonymous with immaturity and tends to be detrimental to ourselves and those about us. Being childlike is a wonderful way to go through life- it means to have a beginner's mind, to retain curiosity, wonder, awe, a fun-loving spirit of adventure, and open-heartedness. In this sense, I will gladly wear Peter Pan's green leotards and pointed feathered cap until my dying day.