

## **Staying Sober the Mindful Way: Something Old, Something New, Something Borrowed**

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*"Grant me serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference."* This simple prayer, written around 1940, is familiar to anyone who's ever attended an AA, Al-Anon, or other 12-step program meeting. It speaks to the value of being able to focus on what you can control (usually: your own behavior) and let go of what you can't control (other people's behavior, your DNA, traffic, the economy) as an important tool in maintaining sobriety and well-being.

These same principles of accepting what you can't change, and taking responsibility for what you can, are also at the heart of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), a new approach to treating anxiety, depression and chronic pain - conditions which are often triggers for people in recovery from substance abuse and addiction.

Something old, something new - both pointing to a seemingly simple solution to staying sober/calm/happy/pain-free: yet so many people continue to struggle in their addictions and general unhappiness. Why is it so difficult for most people to just accept and let go?

One explanation is we lack "the wisdom to know the difference", so we're always trying to change the wrong things (like other people). Another explanation lies in the nature of the human mind, which is to focus on the negative. Mindfulness-based awareness practices, borrowed from the 2,500 year old Buddhist tradition, offer this explanation: the root of all suffering is non-acceptance, i.e. striving, grasping, judging, blaming, worrying, longing. Acceptance of "what is" brings relief from suffering, a.k.a serenity.

Unhappiness exists in the gap between what is and how you would like it to be. Striving to change your circumstances or the people in your life to make them more like what you want is one way to narrow the gap and find happiness - learning to enjoy life just as it is in the present moment is another. Which way is more likely to succeed?

The present moment, and what we do with it, is really the only thing we can possibly hope to have control over. Yet most of us pay little attention to the present, because we're so busy planning for/worrying about the future, or reminiscing/ruminating about the past - no wonder we feel stressed and overwhelmed!

Mindfulness meditation is one of the most useful tools for the addict/alcoholic to deal with cravings. It teaches us to respond to thoughts, sensations and emotions as we do to sounds - observe that they come and go, and that we don't have to act on them. We become aware of an incredible richness and spaciousness of inner experience. And most importantly for the addict/alcoholic, we learn to stop judging ourselves and others so harshly.