

# Compassionate Communication with Our Partners



**Literature Committee Approved**

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## **Introduction**

This pamphlet is for sex addicts whose partners have discovered their acting out and for whom home life has become difficult. It assumes that, despite difficulties, the member nonetheless wants to continue in the relationship. We offer our experience in dealing with this situation, what has worked to improve our relationships, and a message of hope.

## **The problem**

When our acting out was discovered, a painful situation often resulted. Some of us were surprised or afraid when our partners seemed hurt, and acted as if they had been traumatized – like they had stepped on a landmine. They may have behaved in a hostile manner, and even threatened to end the relationship. Many of us saw our partners' be-

havior as controlling. We perceived them as suspicious, questioning our every move.

Rather than listening to our partners and trying to understand them, we often reacted defensively and tried to rationalize our behavior, or we retreated. We sometimes acted out again rather than face the conflict head on. Everything seemed to be getting worse, and there was no hope in sight.

### **A spiritual solution**

To effectively deal with the difficulties in our relationships, we applied spiritual principles, such as patience, honesty, empathy, and compassion. However, we didn't have to wait until we had worked all of the Twelve Steps to begin applying the spiritual principles as we learned them. We could use the concepts of the steps in our relationships.

For example, we recognized the problem of unmanageability in our relationships and our need for help handling it (Steps One and Two). We surrendered our relationships to our Higher Power, letting go of outcomes, and understanding that we were not the only member in the relationship whose opinion mattered (Step Three). We considered our part in creating our situation and discussed this with our sponsor or others in the program (Steps Four and Five). We asked our Higher Power to relieve us of our tendency to react defensively or angrily (Steps Six and Seven). We tried to be the kind of partner we would like to have ourselves, even when our partners were triggered and were - in our opinion - treating us harshly or unfairly (Steps Eight and Nine). We resolutely tried to respond in a loving, respectful manner, at all times, without trying to achieve any specific result (Step Ten). Of course, we needed our Higher Power's help to implement this resolution (Step Eleven). We also needed to continue practicing these principles in all areas of our lives and relationships and participate in the fellowship (Step Twelve). We kept in mind that regardless of where we were in working the steps, we could put these principles to work and improve our relationships.

Keeping these principles in mind, we learned to respond with compassion instead of reacting defensively. How did we do that?

### **Responding with compassion instead of reacting defensively**

Our sponsors or others may have pointed out to us when we were being defensive and shown us what compassion looked like. We could then begin to be compassionate with our partners.

For example, we often felt the urge to argue with our partners when we felt defensive. In those moments, we lost connection with our spiritual selves. Something that helped many of us was focusing our attention on what was going on within our bodies and noticing our physical sensations such as heart rate, muscle tension, angry feelings, etc. This helped us identify our emotional intensity. Once we were self-connected again, we could respond from a place of compassion for our partners and ourselves, which was important, since reacting defensively didn't help the situation.

This process used the first four steps. We acknowledged our powerlessness over our emotional reactions and the unmanageability this was likely to bring us if we acted on them. We recognized the need to be restored to sanity, made a decision to turn to our Higher Power for help, and inventoried our mental and emotional responses.

### **Compassionate communication**

The other thing we did was communicate four key ideas to our partners. These are:

- a. I own it.
- b. I get it.
- c. I'm doing my best to fix it
- d. I'm going to be here for you if you want me to be.

#### **a. I own it**

***Principles: courage, honesty, humility, responsibility***

Our harmful behaviors included not only sexual acting out, but also lying, manipulation, keeping secrets, etc. We acknowledged these to our partners, without trying to justify or explain them.

When they accused us of actions we may have been guilty of in the past but not in the moment, we agreed with them that we had done so previously.

To “own it” to ourselves means to take responsibility for these behaviors. We realized we could not continue our harmful actions (Step One). We started seeking new ways of doing things. We began to work our recovery program. When we owned our behaviors, we were able to act with integrity, which had a big impact for many of us in the long run.

We had to continuously evaluate our actions and attitudes to make sure that our words and actions were consistent (Step Ten). We learned that we can apply the principles of any step at any time.

Although we strive to be compassionate and understanding, we do not have to tolerate abuse of any kind, be it physical or verbal, or being treated with disrespect. There may come a time when we have to withdraw from the situation – for a few moments, or even forever. In any case, we try to exit the situation as compassionately as possible, without blaming or shaming anyone.

### **b. I get it**

#### ***Principles: acceptance, empathy, openness, respect, responsibility***

While we may not have completely understood what it was like for our partners, we could acknowledge the pain they were experiencing. When our partners expressed feelings, many of us reflected back the feelings we heard, asking for confirmation that we understood them correctly. We communicated that it was understandable to us that they felt the way they did. This means that we make an effort to connect with how they might be feeling.

We often felt uncomfortable with their responses. Sometimes when we reflected our partners’ feelings back to they reacted negatively. When that happened, we tried not to be daunted. We realized that perhaps they finally felt heard and more fully expressed their feelings. In other words, we were on the right track, but we felt challenged by their reaction.

We also began to acknowledge not only the feelings they expressed, but the needs behind them that were not met by our behavior. For example, if they said that we lied to them, we acknowledged that our actions didn't meet their need for honesty. Often, acknowledging the needs that were behind their feelings deepened their realization that we truly wanted to understand where they were coming from -- that they mattered to us, and this helped contribute to healing.

**c. I'm doing my best to fix it**

***Principles: courage, faith, humility***

When we worked the program diligently and demonstrated a change of behavior toward our partners, they may have observed that we were truly trying to become the kind of partners they wanted. We communicated this new outlook and our intention to continue changing.

Working the program also helped us become different people truly living new lives! This is a powerful way of making living amends (Steps Eight and Nine).

**d. I'm going to be here for you  
if you want me to be**

***Principles: courage, empathy, humility, patience, persistence***

If our partners were willing to stay with us, or we were reunited after a separation, we demonstrated that we were committed to change by communicating to them that we were in it for the long haul, even through the tough times. Of course, we had to actually be there for them, over and over. We have often found that this also led to a stronger relationship bond since we were more fully committed - something our partners eventually picked up on.

**How we communicated and lived these ideas**

There was no single way to communicate these four key ideas to our partners. Some of us communicated them silently. We empathized through our presence. When our partners wept while remembering the pain they felt about our acting out, we did, too. When they wanted to express their anger, we just listened. Other times, we

communicated these ideas through our words. To the best of our ability, we communicated them with our actions.

The important thing is that we communicated these four ideas to our partners consistently and repeatedly. Usually, the storms became less frequent and less intense over time. It didn't happen quickly, but it was worth the considerable effort it took. We began rebuilding our relationships one interaction at a time.

Of course, we needed encouragement and support in this endeavor. We shared about our struggles with this new approach with our sponsor and others in the program on phone calls and at meetings. Such sharing was essential to changing our behaviors and attitudes. We didn't allow such vulnerability to take us down a shame spiral. The solution was to work Steps Four through Nine.

Sometimes, despite our best efforts, the damage was too great, and the relationship ended. However, we didn't give up on our recovery. After all, changing our behavior and attitudes was going to be good for us regardless of what happened to the relationship. In fact, we wanted to improve all of our relationships - with ourselves, our Higher Power, and others. And, of course, even if our current relationship fails, for many of us there will be another relationship. Experience has shown that if we don't change our behaviors, problems will repeat in future relationships.

When we kept these key ideas in mind, gradually we were able to act differently with our partners, and gradually they noticed. The situation really did improve. For many of us, our relationships are better than they ever were before. We believe this is possible for all of us.

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