

2.3 Resentment and Envy

Resentment & Envy: ‘Wealthism’: perceived or real, hinders our recovery.

If I had your money, I'd never be an alcoholic.

This topic has a different twist to it in that we are talking about how others react to us as a block to our recovery. This is a sensitive subject few speak up about.

However, discussing how wealthism impacts us when we seek help is necessary!

- Why? Because unlike other barriers to recovery which erode our commitment to change, this one impacts those of us who actually want to quit and sober up. Often, when we run up against prejudice, we lose our enthusiasm, become defensive and try to just get by until we leave treatment or convince our family to back off.

The core genius of the 12-step movement is that people with a common problem learn from each other in order to stop self-destructive behavior. We now know that this same sharing of common experiences can occur in many different settings- not just a 12 step meeting – so people do not have to go to AA to experience the cathartic of telling your story.

- Recovery is about the ability to tell our truth to other addicts and be accepted for who we are, flaws and all.
- It's also about being able to reflect on, identify and delve into what's driving our addiction.

Without a doubt, prejudice against the privileged is rampant in the treatment and recovery communities. That's a big barrier in overcoming alcohol and drug use, because unless we feel safe and free to tell our truth, it's difficult to even contemplate stopping. And it's nearly impossible, if staff resents us for the same reasons or stands in awe or caters to us due to our status as VIP's. A common reaction is to turn negative feedback on ourselves, resulting in self-hatred that becomes even more corrosive when compounded with shame from being addicted.

Our Reality: Impact of Resentment and Envy on our Recovery

Resentment and envy can make it difficult for us to connect with other alcoholics/addicts and participate in recovery programs:

- Stress over hiding who we are really are in conversations with others – the fear of being discovered. Living a lie.
- Not connecting with other alcoholics and addicts through the sharing of our stories. We edit or suppress important parts for fear that the telling will lead to negative reactions. Thus, we never get the first step. We never rejoin the human race.
- Withdrawing from others. Not being present on an emotional level. Our peers in treatment and recovery sense something is missing, but what is it? Listening but not responding in kind.
- Guilt, because we also believe that money “could buy happiness” and feel like we have failed. This guilt prevents us from expressing our needs. Do we deserve to recover, when we blew it?

- Trying to manage or adjust the situation to minimize or offset anticipated or actual envy and hostility. Another way of not connecting or surrendering – we are attempting to exercise control over how we present ourselves to others.
- Lack of contact with reality by avoiding the mainstream recovery community. Without regular contact with ordinary people, our personal issues can spiral into major emotional crisis. In fact, our problems are often trivial when compared to those facing ordinary people.
- Reluctant to ask for feedback. We may not want to hear some truths about ourselves – that there is a level of arrogance and entitlement that comes across despite our best efforts to counteract these traits.
- Some people think of us as objects or stereotypes instead of real people with a disease that is killing us.
- We fear people will take advantage of us: gossip about us, sell our stories to the media, or ask us for money.

Above all, it's hard for us to feel good about ourselves as we repeatedly hear negative messages. As mentioned, we get stuck in self-loathing and can't find the sources of strength needed to engage in treatment.

What We Experience – Let's Define It

Wealthism Wealthism: Prejudice towards wealthy people. Includes actions or attitudes that dehumanize or objectify wealthy people because they are wealthy. Main attitudes - awe, envy, resentment

Resentment and envy is part of *wealthism*. Wealthism is prejudice towards people with money, simply because they have money. It includes actions or attitudes that dehumanize and objectify us. Expressions include resentment, envy and awe.

- Resentment is a form of hostility or anger.
- Envy is a covert form of anger. Envy is based on the idea that anybody can be rich or well-known or powerful. So why is it you and not me?
- Awe is the (apparent) experience of being overwhelmed by the “beauty or extent of the riches” or, by vicarious enjoyment of our experiences as moneyed or well known people.
- Awe is an indirect form of envy. Concern for our feelings is overwhelmed by the excitement generated by wealth. We are simply conduits for the assumed “magic” in our lives.

And let's name it when we experience or see it, particularly so for our friends seeking help.

Thanks to Joannie Brofman for her dissertation on the Experience of Inherited Wealth. coining “Wealthism” and forthrightness in defining the problem

Sample Comments

As children, we tend to hear the direct words, while as adults we experience indirect variations like patronizing behavior, false friendships, exploitive business or charitable proposals. But in treatment, the juvenile directness returns

- “Your father is so wonderful. You are so lucky! Can I touch you?”

- “Listen, if you got problems with your beautiful wife, let me have her, I know how to make her happy.”
- Our unit voted and decided with \$20 million you will never recover.”
- “How can you have problems. You are so beautiful, you can have any man you want!”
- “Oh look, here is your picture in Elle.”
- “You got it easy. Why are you working so hard in treatment. Your life is handed to you on a silver platter.”
- “What’s it like to work with Brad Pitt?.”
- “You are so lucky, I wish I had what you had.”
- “Can I have your autograph?”
- “Oh no, you are one of those people, I can’t sit with you.”
- With his kind of money, put up with the abuse.”
- “Will you lend me money?”

Hard to want to fit in, and even more so without the support of staff, who fall back on stereotypes, like “trust fund baby” or “arm candy” for a successful spouse.

Treatment Resistant, Chronic Relapser or Normal Reaction to Predjudice/Betrayal?

It’s no wonder many of us are labelled “treatment resistant”, uncooperative or reluctant to participate in group activities.

- Who wouldn’t when face with outright hostility from peers or the failure by treatment staff to intervene on our behalf or respect our personal experiences. This a prime example of “blame the victim”, when in fact it is treatment that failed. We hear from parents who give up on children who keep relapsing, but when we dig deeper find they were afraid to participate and too often abused because of their background. These are tragedies in the making, most all avoidable.

Our counselors urge us to let down our guard and begin to trust our peers and the recovery community.

- When we do, too often our new found friends – even “sponsors” – ultimately are more interested in accessing our wallets, pants or famous parents than supporting our sobriety.

Half-way or sober homes with meetings open to outsiders are open season for sophisticated predators taking advantage of vulnerable clients just out of in-patient treatment. For those from out of town or with no stable outside friends, when this duplicity become evident, we withdraw or even worse, relapse or give up on life.

4. Understanding Resentment, Envy and Wealthism.

In our society, it is still permissible to make negative comments about people who are well off prominent or powerful. In some cases, people have had negative experiences with wealthy or prominent people, finding them arrogant, rude, obnoxious. Many people believe that material experiences or possessions create access to happiness – and if you

have money, you shouldn't have problems. Growing income disparity also breeds animosity. But we do bear responsibility for creating many of our own problems:

We can be assholes

- There are valid reasons such as negative experiences with us where we have been rude, obnoxious, willful, arrogant, etc.
- We can go through life insulating our selves from the realities of our behavior. If feedback does get through, we dismiss it or ignore it. (“How dare you speak to me like that?”)
- This adds fuel to the fires of legitimate anger, (while our isolation increases to make sure it does not happen again).

Growing income disparity – the top 1% are much richer

- From 1979 to 1997 (18 years) the incomes (adjusted for inflation) of:
The average family rose from \$41,400 to \$45,100 – **9%**
The top one percent rose from \$420,200 to \$1,016 million – **140%**
- The top one percent was 10 times richer in 1979 and 23 times richer in 1997.
This income disparity has increased since 1997. (1/4/02 NYT – Krugman)
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- At Ivy League schools many of the affluent are PBE students – Parent Bought Experiences – in all aspects of their lives from tutors, to ADHD study meds, to peak volunteer and after school activities

No wonder people are angry with us.

Because of myths we and others create

Envy and resentment also stems from the idea that we are happy, have an easy life and are able to do whatever we want when we want to do it. There are several reasons for this:

- Our image building – giving the appearance life is easy and grand.
- Our unwillingness to talk about the realities of our lives – the problems and dysfunctions.
- The belief we have transcended the basic activities ordinary people engage in to survive, yet we behave in ways that prove we are unworthy of this transcendence. (See bad behavior of the week in People or the tabloids.)
- A culture that sells Americans on the idea that those who work hard will be rewarded with success. Many people work hard, yet do not achieve their goals for success. This can lead to anger against the successful, their family members and successive generations who simply inherit money. (*Myth of the American dream.*)
- Media selling Americans on the idea that material experiences or possessions create happiness and satisfaction (or access to happiness and satisfaction). Since we have money, a name, or are in positions of importance, others conclude we must be happy and they either want what we have or resent us for having it. (*Materialism.*)

Whether legitimate or not, being self-aware and sensitive rather than dismissive of views and feelings of the non-wealthy reflects an appreciation how our circumstances in life could so easily be different.

What to Do?

Because resentment and envy emanates from others and so hinders our efforts to sober up, we need some ideas on how to manage it in the recovery community

My Experience

On personal level, I was outed by someone who knew of me, so I made a decision to be honest as to the generalities of my situation. Because I had talked about the loss of my brother and son, a good connection existed with many peers. And having spent years in sports and all male schools, I knew how to navigate the treatment unit environment. But many others are not successful

When I did discuss how my finances and upbringing were part of my addiction, several peers came up to me and talked privately about their situation, but when their story time came, kept all that quiet. I could see the difference between the relief I felt from being honest and their continued obsessions and resentments about being in treatment. This was a light bulb moment for me and a motivator for exploring how wealthism impacted other affluent people attempting to recover,

6. Some recovery practices to manage *resentment and envy*? How?

- Asking for help from trusted counselors, mentors or friends (a support team) about how to tell our truth to others. This is about coaching and support. Since this is new for us, there will be a variety of experiences to talk about with our support team. No one gets this right the first few times. It is empowering to let others know who we really are.
- Telling who we are in a safe environment. The fear of speaking our truth is much greater than the reaction we receive when we do talk about our lives. Most people will still like us. A few will not. Don't take it personally.
- When describing events use the general description of the problem rather than the specifics. Otherwise the focus of the listener is on the details, rather than the problem.

Example: "I went to political events to make me feel important. I was able to donate large sums of money which gave me access to the most important politicians." Do not say "I donated \$100,000 to the Republicans which allowed me to have lunch with Dick Cheney".

Or money (connections, position) allowed me to use more and at the same time avoid consequences.

- Speak to the feelings and emotions in our lives as any normal person would. Allow yourself to be fully human. It is OK to acknowledge serious problems in our lives and deficient (defective) upbringings while at the same time having or being related to money or prominence.
- Boundaries. Another time to ask for help – coaching. How to manage envy, resentment and awe. Examples of boundary talk:
"I am afraid to tell you about me for fear that you will not like me or ask me for things or gossip about me."

“No, it is not Ok to ask me for my autograph, I am here for treatment (a meeting).”

“ I am hurt that you seem angry with me, but I am here for help and I can’t get help unless I talk about my life.”

“The person you see in the picture or film or on TV is not the real me. It is an act or an image. The real me is an alcoholic/addict.”

“I am angry that when I told you money was an enabling factor in my life, you turned around and asked me for money. I felt that is a violation of the group trust.”

“Just because I look good by society’s standards does not mean I don’t have problems. I do have problems and I would like your support.”

Needed: Good Treatment Centers and Supportive Counselors

Unfortunately, centers providing quality treatment that addresses the needs of the affluent and therapists who can support us and advise on how to tell our truth are hard to find.

(Note to us: We need to start our own one.)

What about centers that specialize in affluent clients?

- First, many of the patients in these centers are not interested in recovery -they are there to dry out or please others – not a healthy peer group’
- Second, many of these centers are high end spas and lack the rigorous treatment programs necessary to build a foundation for recovery.
- Finally, one core principle in recovery is that we become comfortable in our own skin – who we are as a person. We can’t do that if we avoid 90% of the population.

In addition to these three concerns, in my view speciality centers do not truly understand our underlying drivers of addiction, barriers to and challenges of recovery.