

PRINCIPLE FOUR

*We seek accountability and to build our character
as children of God.*

Growing in Transformation: I Mature in Character

Principle Four is about accountability and about character. In the early days of learning about accountability you may have many mistaken notions of what it means. As addicts, most of us resist the idea of being accountable. We don't like being told what to do. We bristle at the thought of having to check in with someone. When an accountability partner gives or withholds his permission for us to do certain things, we protest that we're being treated like a child. We question why we should submit to another person or allow someone else to control us so tightly.

(Now, be honest: Isn't your reaction fairly similar to what I just described?)

This mindset is what makes most addicts resistant to the idea of accountability. It also represents many of the misconceptions about what it means to be accountable to someone about your recovery.

Assignment Two – Assessing Our Character

In addition to practicing accountability, men of integrity are men of character.

Character refers to the kind of people we are even when there *isn't* accountability. Character is the way we live when we know no one is watching or will find out. The apostle Paul, in Galatians, describes a character marked by integrity. He outlines the disposition of the sinful nature and contrasts it with the makeup of a life lived in the Spirit:

“The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other.” Galatians 5:19-26 (NIV)

This verse is the theme of Principle Four. Working on the fruits of the Spirit will be a lifetime journey, which in many churches is a process referred to as “sanctification.” If, then, this process won’t be completed in this lifetime, there’s no way you will “complete” this assignment. But you can get started.

The Angry (Wounded) Heart

Since anger, along with loneliness, is the main emotion that drives sexual addiction, it’s a good place to start. You’ll notice how quickly Paul talks about anger in the passage above after he’s described sexual immorality. Paul uses a number of words to break down “anger”: hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions, and envy.

These words are all obviously different, but their root is the same: a wounded heart that’s angry about not being loved and nurtured. Realize that we all need to be affirmed, praised, heard, touched in healthy ways, adored, and included in a healthy community. When we don’t feel we’re getting these things, we can become angry like a little child who’s having a temper tantrum. In fact, if you’re like me, there’s a lot about your acting out that’s very juvenile, exactly like a temper tantrum. Anger and a desperate need to get our needs met will lead to our being ambitious, envious, jealous, and competitive. We’ll have fits of rage, dissensions, and lots of discord.

Anger can come out in a lot of ways. Sometimes it’s direct; at other times it’s sarcastic (indirect). We might get angry at someone who doesn’t deserve it, because whatever he or she said or did reminded us of an older wound and an older anger, perhaps even unconsciously.

It is often important to identify who caused our original pain. Take a moment and ask God to teach you if your anger is older than the current situation. That is, if your anger at this person is really a reminder of an older wound. One way to identify older emotions is to ask, “How old am I feeling right now?” You may be surprised to discover you feel like you’re very young. You feel small and vulnerable and perhaps helpless. One symptom of responding in the moment to a much older situation is if painful memories come up for

you. If you ask the right questions, memories of the original wound might surface. Don't be afraid of these memories. They're cleansing.

If you find that your anger is really out of control, you may need to work with a Christian therapist who can help discover its root. You may find that simply talking about your anger with trusted people will help dissipate it. Writing about the anger is another good way of expressing it. Remember, *anger can't be suppressed*; it will always come out sooner or later, usually in unhealthy ways.

Often therapy and support revolves around understanding how we were wounded and feeling the freedom to express anger at those who wounded us. These steps are an important part of the journey. They allow us to know that we didn't deserve the things that happened to us. They are ways we grieve, and therefore, heal.

Journaling Exercise: Your Anger

For now, make a list of those whom you know you're angry with. Identify the people and write specifically what you're angry about. Share these memories with your group and ask them for feedback about any anger you might be showing today. Could it be related to these older situations?

Our Anger at God

When you're exploring your anger at others, don't forget about being angry with God. In the pain of my addiction, I was often angry with God. Many times I had prayed for Him to remove all lustful thoughts and temptations from my life. I wanted to be magically healed or delivered. Even as a child I was angry that God didn't prevent me from all harm. Later, as I grew up and even since I became a Christian, I could get angry with God about anything that didn't go right in my life.

And I stayed stuck in my anger with God. Of course, I didn't know it was OK to be angry with God. I thought my feelings were just one more item in a long list of strikes against me. I stuffed my anger deep inside my heart and never shared it with anyone.

Perhaps you've felt the same way. You've believed it was wrong to be angry with God. If so, get out your Bible and read some of the Psalms that describe how angry King David felt with God at times. God doesn't ask us to squash our feelings, even the "bad" ones.

Journaling Exercise: Your Anger at God

Write a second list of reasons you've felt angry with God.

Now you have two lists of anger to share with your group. What do you do next?

I'm going to make a radical suggestion that might surprise you: **Decide to forgive every person on your list.** You might respond, "What? You just told me to be angry with these people, and now you're telling me to forgive them. I don't feel like doing that! Besides, none of them has asked for my forgiveness." This reaction is common, but it also springs from misunderstanding forgiveness.

Understanding Forgiveness

Forgiving someone else is for *your* emotional healing, not theirs. You can *decide* at some point to forgive even if you don't *feel* like it. Often, we get this order backward. We think we have to feel like doing something before we do it. Actually, the reverse sequence is true: Our feelings may *follow* our decisions, not the other way around. An AA slogan is, "Take the right action, and the feelings will follow." *Forgiveness is an act of the will.* Healing emotions may follow immediately or only after considerable time has passed.

Some of us have been counseled not to give up our anger too quickly because if we do, we'll stay vulnerable to being hurt again. Don't confuse forgiveness with your ongoing need to set healthy boundaries. You can be safe and still forgive. In fact, *forgiveness doesn't necessarily mean the reconciliation of relationship.* Your boundaries may include not having contact with those who hurt you, and that's OK. Another mistake we make is in thinking that forgiveness is a one-time event. You may have to forgive someone over and over again.

Journaling Exercise: Forgiving

Write in your journal about a specific decision you've made to forgive someone. Describe the offense or wound, then write a statement of forgiveness to the one who hurt you. You might begin, "I choose to forgive

for _____."

Here's the bottom line: *Forgiving someone is a spiritual act of obedience.* It's what Jesus tells us to do: "*Forgive us our debts (trespasses) as we forgive our debtors.*" Do you want to be forgiven for your sexual sins? Practice forgiving others for whatever hurt they have caused you. When you've made a decision to forgive, then you must *act* like you have. Remember that you can still have your boundaries and you may still experience strong feelings, but you *act* in a way that brings honor to God. Refer back to the fruits of the Spirit that Paul talks about: patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, and self-control.

We can choose to act according to these fruits as an act of obedience to God, no matter how we feel.

With God, you, of course, don't need to forgive Him. But you do need to work on accepting that everything God has allowed to happen to you has been for a reason. Just because you don't understand the reason yet doesn't mean there isn't one. Today, I think back on all the things I was angry with God about, and I see that from some of them I learned some great lessons. Would I take that knowledge away? Not on your life! I've discovered that the times I'm most angry or disappointed with God have ultimately been the ones that are the most character-building. Growth is usually painful.

Reflect on what you have learned from the pain that God has allowed in your life. Write in your journal about some of those lessons if you can. There are a number of great books about this. One that has profoundly affected me is Larry Crabb's *Shattered Dreams*.

Journaling Exercise: Lessons Learned

Reflect in your journal about some of the lessons you've learned through adversity. How have these experiences built your character?

Anger Fueled by Fear or Anxiety

Often, we are angry because we are *afraid*. We don't feel safe and we worry about the future. Our wounds from the past may have impaired our ability to feel safe. We've been hurt and abandoned, and we have memories of fear and anxiety. Something in the present can easily trigger us back to those older feelings. Fear and anxiety feed upon themselves and can create a vicious cycle of obsessive thinking about danger.

It's important to understand the difference between anxiety and fear. *Anxiety* is usually about something more global or general in nature – like being totally alone, having no meaning in your life, experiencing death, and being judged or condemned. *Fear* is usually about something specific.

I am generally afraid of not getting my grass cut in the summer and my driveway shoveled in the winter (I live in Minnesota you understand). I can become really obsessed and worried about these things when they don't get done. I can get angry at myself for not doing them or at others (like my two sons) for not helping me. The fact is that taking care of my house symbolizes taking care of my life. A well-cut lawn or a well-shoveled driveway can help me feel that I am doing a good job of protecting my "space." It sounds silly, doesn't it?

Our "silly" obsessions are perhaps symbols of deep anxieties that we carry from our wounds. When you begin to understand that even little things can trigger you into deeper anxieties, you can realize why there are times when even little things bother you so much. An important part of assessing our character is understanding these "buttons" that trigger us into anger, anxiety, or fear. But how many of the things that you worry about have been labeled "silly" by others? (If you would like to work more on this distinction between anxiety and fear, the *Faithful and True* workbook leads you through it, pages 51-55.)

If you're really impaired by anxiety, the antidote may involve taking medication for a time. Don't be afraid of this approach; many people may need this help. Some of us have genetic predispositions in our neurochemistry to have more difficulty with fear and anxiety. Others have experienced such profound trauma that they need extra help to feel safe. Neither situation is something to be ashamed of. It's simply a part of who we are. Part of maturing in character may be challenging our pride or embarrassment at requiring this level of help.

Journaling Exercise: Your Fear

*Write in your journal about the last time you felt really afraid.
Can you identify any words or events that triggered the feeling?*

Fellowship: An Antidote to Fear

Another important antidote to fear and anxiety is the safety you're beginning to experience in your L.I.F.E. Recovery Group. We learn to be afraid in unhealthy relationships, and we can learn to feel safe in healthy ones. Assessing our character may involve recognizing how our trust of others is impaired because of our woundedness. Finding fellowship through a support group can be a huge step of faith.

During check-in time at every group be sure to report on any fears or anxieties you're having. Begin to think about what might help you to feel safe. At the appropriate times get some feedback from your accountability group about safety.

The main antidote to fear and anxiety is *developing a greater dependence on God*. The journey of transformation and recovery is a spiritual journey. As many times as necessary, refer back to the work that you need to do in Principle Two, and remind yourself of the ongoing discipline you'll need to grow in your relationship with Christ.