

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 Three – Cultivating Our Character

Principle Four is about growing in transformation and maturing in character. This assignment focuses on how we *cultivate* our character. Fortunately, we have a detailed description of a mature character: the fruits of the Spirit that Paul describes in Galatians 5. These godly fruits are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Wouldn't we all like to be more like that in character? Again, modeling ourselves after these qualities will be a lifetime journey. Hopefully, as you continue your journey of healing, you'll develop more and more self-control.

One of the keys to the other qualities of character is the ability to be empathetic. Empathy is that ability to put yourself in the place of someone else and to completely understand what he or she is going through. Do you begin to see that your addiction has given you an opportunity to be more empathetic? You're beginning to understand your wounds, your pain, your loneliness, your anger, and your fear. This understanding will help you better understand those feelings in others. You'll be able to listen to their stories and understand their pain. You'll be more patient, kind, good, gentle, and peaceful. This change in character comes from your own humility.

This assignment is one piece in your ongoing journey to develop empathy. *Selfishness, of course, is the enemy of empathy.* Since most of us are turned off by the selfishness of others, why are we so often selfish? One formula I believe to be true is:

Selfishness is equal to unhealed wounds.

Selfish people are those who feel that their needs haven't been met. Selfish people are also those who think only *they* can meet their own needs. This belief is an aspect of the original sin, "I control my life; I don't trust God to do it." As you continue to work this program, you'll discover more and more that only God can meet your needs. You'll also find some of your desires are being met through safe, intimate relationships with others. You should become less selfish as you learn that there are healthy ways to get what you need.

Empathy for Others

Empathy begins when you discover that others are just as wounded as you are. One of the great tasks of recovery is to understand that you're not alone in your wounds. As you listen to others in your L.I.F.E. Recovery Group, the universality of pain should become clear. As a way of aiding that process, Assignment Three asks you to do some rather strange things.

Journaling Exercise: Cultivating Empathy

- 1. First, interview one of your accountability partners about the wounds he's experienced. Make a list of these wounds in your journal. (Obviously, ask his permission first. It's probably best to not identify him by name.)*
- 2. Now, pick a member of your family. It may be your wife, a sibling, cousin, uncle or aunt, or anyone else you feel safe with. If that safe person isn't your wife yet, then use someone else. (This person should have done some reflecting about his or her own life journey. Don't seek to educate this person or convince him of any wounds he hasn't accepted or understood.) Interview this person about the wounds he's discovered about himself, and write in your journal about what you learned in this interview.*

Let's continue with a rather dangerous assignment by imagining your last acting out partner. It may be a person in a pornographic picture or it may be someone you were with physically. It may be a person you lusted after. *NOTE: Even if you have the opportunity to interview this person, don't.*

I want you to simply imagine what it might have been like for this person growing up. Let me help you. For example, do you know that the vast majority of women who pose for pornography were sexually abused as little girls? The same would be true for your average prostitute, both female and male. What's the life history of your last affair partner? In what ways was that person wounded as a child? Remember, all of these people are someone's daughter or son, someone's sibling, and perhaps someone's husband or wife. Do you see what I mean?

Journaling Exercise: Practicing Empathy

In your journal, write a few paragraphs that tell the life story of the acting out partner you chose. What do you think it was like for this person as a child? What pain or life challenges has he or she endured?

One of the basic truths about sexual acting out is that you have to objectify that person - that is, imagine him or her as an object - to diminish any feelings of guilt or discomfort that you might otherwise have. When you view your sexual partners as wounded human beings, you gain empathy for their pain, and it's much harder to objectify them.

Affirming Others

Now, let's work on cultivating character in another direction. How are you in being affirming and encouraging? Many of us, since we were abandoned in the area of those positive strokes ourselves, have a hard time being that way with others, particularly those whom we really love.

You might have to diligently practice this one. Make a conscious effort to be affirming and encouraging of your brothers in your L.I.F.E. Recovery Group. When you give any feedback to someone who has shared, start with an affirmation. Be encouraging before, during, and after meetings.

Now, consider those around you whom you love. Who do you suspect is really starved for affirmation and encouragement? Maybe it's your spouse. Remember that she might not be acting like she needs encouragement because she's so angry or withdrawn. If you have children, they probably need affirmation.

Journaling Exercise: Affirmation

Make a commitment to affirm someone close to you everyday. Note in your journal what you did and how the person reacted.

Reflect back on a person who was affirming and encouraging in your life. It may not be the person whom you hoped it would be, like your mom or dad. Do you remember how kind and generous and patient and loving that person was to you? Wouldn't you like to offer those gifts to someone else?

I've seen some miraculous changes in other people when I've simply taken the time to affirm them. Imagine the smile on someone's face who finds delight in your encouraging words.

You'll find that if you carry out these assignments, your character will improve. You'll become more patient, kind, gentle, and self-controlled. Why? Because of your ability to be empathetic. Do you see how important it is to cultivate your character in this area?

NOTE: If you find you have a hard time affirming others, go back to the anger section and continue to work on your core woundedness. Remember that there is no shame in talking to a pastor, counselor, or trusted friend.

Journaling Exercise: From Scripture

Study two separate but related scriptures and consider the words of Christ:

Luke 6: 27-49

Matthew 7: 1-12

Write in your journal your thoughts about these two teachings.

Finally, remember again that character formation is a lifetime journey. Affirm yourself for finally thinking about these things and taking them seriously.