

# Together AZ

Inspiring Success On The Road To Recovery

February 2012

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## Recovery: What's a Coach Got To Do With It?

By Bill Ryan BRJ-1, RAS, CLC

*In our world today, getting sober may be easier than staying sober. Talking about addiction recovery has finally come out from under the rug, yet mainstream media's myopic view of addiction is still focused on celebrity mishaps in tabloids and analysis on TV talk shows. It's no secret 'sensationalism' sells newspapers and increases ratings. Getting the attention tuned to recovery success stories still has a way to go.*

*For any newcomer it's the "living part," after treatment or detox — where things get tricky. Joining and becoming part of a 12 step fellowship has worked since Dr. Bob and Bill Wilson met some 70 plus years ago.*

*It was recommended when I first got sober to find a sponsor, and truthfully I didn't know what that meant. I was hesitant to ask anyone, because my pride kept me from "looking as if I didn't know." I soon overcame that mistake and was introduced to a woman whom I still consider instrumental in making my first few years of recovery bearable — and eventually fun. Today, in addition to having a 12 step sponsor, many people are choosing to enhance their growth with a recovery coach.*

*We wanted to share with you reasons why someone might choose to have a coach through an interview with our colleague, Bill Ryan. Bill is not only a recovery and life coach and sponsor of many; he is also an addiction specialist and interventionist.*

—Barbara Nicholson-Brown, Publisher



### What is a Recovery Coach and how do they differ from a 12 step sponsor?

The first thing to understand is that a recovery coach is not affiliated with, or a representative of any 12 Step program. Coaches act as advocates for any and all programs, depending on the needs of the person — basically what they and the recovery team believe will work best for a successful start on the path to recovery.

Just like sponsors, coaches are not paid to take anyone through the 12 Steps. Nor do they demand anyone work a program to stay clean and sober. This is a decision that must be made by the addict or alcoholic. If they truly want help, they will need to commit themselves to

doing the work. Any responsible member of a 12 Step fellowship would never accept money to do what is clearly defined as service work. It is the joy of giving back what has been so freely given to them.

As is the case with many of the best addiction treatment professionals, a majority of recovery coaches are members of 12 Step programs themselves. They have a true understanding of abstinence and recovery, based on their own experience. To quote a phrase from the basic text of Narcotics Anonymous: "the therapeutic value of one addict helping another is without parallel."

A sponsor is a person who has been abstinent for an extended period of time and

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## Some Reflections on Suffering

By Jeffrey C. Friedman, MHS, LISAC

**I**n 1911 the pioneering psychoanalyst Carl Jung wrote, "All neurosis is a substitute for genuine suffering." Jung's insight of a century ago may have some value for us today since the conditions from which the readers of *Together AZ* recover — disorders like alcoholism, other chemical and behavioral addictions, depression, anxiety and trauma — are neuroses. Neuroses are a category of disorders that include the ways the nervous system can respond to stress and trauma as well as the myriad of maladaptive behaviors we resort to in our attempts to evade the pain of living. So often, the ways we choose to escape our inescapable suffering end up creating a landslide of trouble — a landslide that can sweep away careers, families, even lives.

Sooner or later, many of us realize that our self-generated pain has reached an existential watershed. We see that our ego-generated suffering finally outweighs that of accepting the unavoidable pain of being human. This is the crossroads many of us find ourselves at as we take our first tentative steps in recovery. And if we are fully able to engage in the recovery process, and if we are gifted with a little grace, our suffering may be transmuted into spiritual awakening and emotional resilience. Such a transformation can occur in the context of

treatment, a religious or spiritual experience, or by the more mundane and gradual two-steps-forward-one-step-back trudge familiar to members of the 12 step groups.

Readers of *Together AZ* may think that a commentary on suffering is an unusual offering for a publication whose focus is hope and whose motto is "inspiring success on the road to recovery." But suffering is a subject to which my mind often turns. I suspect that the reason I think about suffering so much is that I make my living as a behavioral therapist. I work in a field where I have regular contact with people who are in pain — and I am professionally obligated to help them find ways to suffer less. If there is a single skill that expresses the most artful practice of helping others, it may be the ability to empower those with whom we work to find within themselves the flexibility, acceptance and courage to be with their suffering more presently and mindfully, and by taking this brave path, to hurt less. Those few who have a special genius for helping others this way are especially blessed. They make great therapists too.

### Therapist Potency

Now I am a decent therapist but not a great one. I know this because I work with some truly gifted therapists and every day I see



them doing something that I can never quite pull off. With their words, their silences, their gestures and their stillness; but ultimately by their wise, calm and powerful presence, these truly skillful ones create healing insight and heart's ease in those with whom they work. After years of walking among and studying the qualities of great clinicians, I have come to a conclusion about what makes people like these so singular. It is something called

therapist potency. All great healers have it and a rare few have it in spades.

In the field of counseling the term potency is used to describe a vital quality that Native Americans have for millennia known as *medicine*. *Medicine*, sometimes referred to as *mojo*, is a kind of intrinsic spiritual power, an innate wisdom and presence that is one with the possessor's being. *Medicine*, in this

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sense, cannot be taught. It's a quality that a person either has or does not have. Real medicine, is an impossible to fake expression of one's authenticity and wisdom. It is evidence of how one lives his or her life and, but more pointedly, how skillfully they deal with their own existential suffering. Those with special courage to be present with their emotional pain can bring great power to the work of helping others. It seems as if their ability to suffer well empowers their work with other sufferers. Conversely, those who are unable to summon the resolve to sit with their personal pain too often approach helping relationships in a manner that can come off as nervously cheerful—filling the air with psychobabble, pseudo-therapeutic vagaries and self-conscious, well-meaning platitudes. This manner of therapy rarely works well with a client who comes to the helping dialogue with any degree of grounding and self-awareness. And the therapeutic relationship can go badly awry when a client's medicine turns out to be stronger than that of the counselor. Someone of the ilk of the Apache warrior Geronimo, a man of legendary medicine, if subjected to this kind of weak therapeutic approach would certainly be unmoved.

If Geronimo was not one to suffer fools, he was known to suffer well. Growing to manhood in a harsh and unforgiving desert environment, Geronimo bore great difficulties in a way that embodied the highest of Apache values—perseverance, selflessness and a willingness to endure privation and pain. A brave and rigorous walk strengthened Geronimo's body and imbued his soul with a power and presence that, even today, is admired by all who know his story.

Born Goyathay in 1829 in what would one day become Arizona, Geronimo earned his nom de guerre the ferocious, old-fashioned way. While leading an attack against a superior force of Mexican soldiers who had just days before murdered his wife and three children, Goyathay ignored a hail of deadly musket fire to make repeated knife attacks against panicked soldiers who went down screaming desperate pleas to their heavenly patron, St. Jerome (Geronimo!). Getting one's moniker from the dying utterances of one's enemies, I think, imparts a certain gravitas to a person. If the history of the Southwest tells us anything, it tells us Geronimo was that ghetto.

Considering the way in which Geronimo brought potent medicine to the battlefield, we who hope to bring a special healing power to the work of helping others might do well to consider a cogent fact: how we walk may be more central to that effort than how we talk. Our ability to live a mindful, measured and compassionate life, rather than what we think we might know about recovery, could be the key to empowering any care we might offer. For those of us who have chosen a healing profession, the extent to which we are able to sit presently and courageously with our own emotional pain may be the ultimate measure of our professional ability. A psychiatrist can help patients through the artful prescribing of mood-regulating medicine. But we counselors can't prescribe pills. We either bring our own mojo to the therapeutic relationship or we arrive empty handed.

If an effective helper cannot become one in an environment of ease and comfort, and if we each must find our medicine in the way we handle our own suffering, then those of us who practice the healing arts can scarcely avoid the idea that we too must suffer well if we hope to do good.

***"Our ability to live a mindful, measured and compassionate life, rather than what we think we might know about recovery, could be the key to empowering any care we might offer."***

But, sadly, suffering does not always perfect the sufferer. We all know people who, overcome by their own pain, have turned only meaner and more irritable as a result. To achieve therapeutic potency, must those of us who enter the helping professions run the risk of being scorched by our own pain? If the answer to this question is yes—and I think it might be—then it may behoove anyone whose calling is to help others to approach their own suffering mindfully and skillfully, and informed by a spiritual practice in which they have faith.

But for those who prefer a more vivid answer, the closest thing I have so far found came on an evening a few years ago when I was vegging in front of the TV, not really paying attention. I was jolted into presence when I heard a guy speak a simple declarative sentence; but it is one that I will take to my grave. A San Francisco AIDS worker who had endured the worst years of that city's HIV epidemic was being interviewed on the news. He had spent over a decade working 20-hour days giving palliative care to hundreds of dying AIDS patients. Soft spoken and slight, I had to lean in a bit to catch his words. When the interviewer, with a tone of respect rare to news shows, asked the guy from what magic place he summoned the strength to sacrifice so much attending to the final physical and emotional needs of terminally ill young men and women, he paused thoughtfully before saying in a calm and even voice, "Sometimes, when the heart breaks, it breaks open."

I would love it if I could truly wrap my brain around that kind of spirit; that brand of bravery, selflessness and modesty. But then I'm the decent—not gifted therapist. The old Apache would have gotten it though. Separated by a century and a thousand miles, one warrior surely would have recognized another. Geronimo knew strong medicine when he saw it.



*Jeffrey C. Friedman, MHS, LISAC is a primary therapist at Cottonwood Tucson, a 50-bed inpatient behavioral health treatment center located in Tucson, Arizona. He is a summa cum laude graduate of The School of Human Services of Lincoln University (PA). Jeff's work at Cottonwood includes treating chemically dependent and disordered gambling patients, lecturing on the neurobiology of addictive and mood disorders, and presenting workshops on a range of behavioral health issues at counseling conferences throughout the United States, Europe and Asia. His articles have appeared in Together AZ, Counselor Magazine and Addiction Professional.*



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## Did You Know?

Since the mid 1970's, The Franciscan Renewal Center Counseling Ministry has provided counseling services through a staff of professional counselors, all of whom are licensed by the State of Arizona Board of Behavioral Health. Counselors take time from their private practices and volunteer to counsel individuals, families, and couples with one-on-one sessions, as well as facilitated support groups that deal with a variety of adult issues. Though Catholic in tradition, counseling services are not faith based, and people of all faith and people of no faith are welcome at The Casa.

Individual sessions are available mornings, afternoons and evenings, Monday through Friday, and require an appointment. For all counseling services, a suggested donation is appreciated as the ministry is self-sup-

ported. But no one is ever turned away due to an inability to pay.

Grounded in the concepts of peace and human dignity, the Franciscan Renewal Center Counseling Ministry provides an opportunity for its volunteers to serve others. As "wounded healers," the Ministry has the privilege and responsibility to actively participate in healing those who reach out for hope and care. The presence of this Ministry is a response to a call of solidarity with those who are poor and emotionally wounded.

See the event section on page 8 for a list of support groups currently being offered. For more information for you or your clients, call Monday through Friday mornings, 8:30 to 12:00 Noon, Judith McFale, MA, LPC, Counseling Director, 480-948-7460 x 134.