

When Should You Avoid Dealing With Emotions?

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Huffington Post:

One of the cornerstones of alcoholism recovery is what's called "emotional sobriety." The idea is that alcoholics and other addicts, if they hope to stay sober over the long haul, must learn to regulate the negative feelings that can lead to discomfort, craving and — ultimately — relapse. It's a lifelong project, a whole new way of thinking about life's travails.

But the recovery literature also says "first things first" — which simply means, "don't drink." Especially in the early days of recovery, alcoholics are counseled not to analyze why they are addicted, or how they might have avoided alcoholism: "Don't think and don't drink" is the maxim. One day at a time, do whatever it takes — prayer, exercise, meetings — to distract the mind from the compulsion to pick up a glass.

These are really two very different kinds of emotional regulation, when you think of it. Distraction is unthinking — cognitive disengagement from thoughts of alcohol and the anxiety of craving by any means possible. It's a blunt instrument in the toolbox of recovery. By contrast, long-term emotional sobriety requires the slow, steady rethinking of all the people, places and things that once did — and could again — throw us off kilter.

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