

Tool #4

When all else fails (Do the next right thing)

Classroom Wisdom:

“Those who try to do something and fail are infinitely better than those who try to do nothing and succeed.” —Lloyd Jones

“The secret of getting ahead is getting started. The secret of getting started is breaking your complex overwhelming tasks into small manageable tasks, and then starting on the first one.”
—Mark Twain

“It's the action, not the fruit of the action, that's important. You have to do the right thing. It may not be in your power, may not be in your time, that there will be any fruit. But that doesn't mean you stop doing the right thing. You may never know what results come from your action. But if you do nothing, there will be no result.” —Ghandi

Tendency:

As addicts, our minds typically generate negative thinking as the default. We can take the smallest obstacle, challenge, or problem and parlay it into a scenario of doom and gloom without any basis in fact. A small decline in our financial situation can take our imagination all the way to financial ruin. A disagreement with our boss can lead us to thinking we will be fired at any moment. A resentment against our spouse can have us separated forever and never speaking again . . . and so on. When we allow this negative thinking spiral to happen, without taking necessary measures to stop the “disaster in our minds”, we sit frozen in a state of fear and bewilderment, typically accompanied by inaction, isolation, and paranoia. We are frightened. We hate the way we feel, so we fall to our addiction, and our mental condition worsens.

In contemplating disastrous scenarios, we then imagine solutions to these problems that are equally unrealistic. We dream of major positive changes in our life situations without considering or accepting the tangible efforts required to achieve such changes. Maybe we will win the lottery and our financial situation will be resolved. Maybe we will move to a new city where life will be better. Surely the upcoming vacation we are taking will pull the family together and get us back on track. Or, that other person we really like will be the perfect companion and we will be happy once again.

In this state of mind, we do not think clearly or rationally. Our inflated egos, along with our inferiority complexes, combine to generate totally unrealistic pictures of the future.

Recovery Tool:

One tool that has helped me tremendously with this debilitating problem is simply doing the next right thing. Now implementing this antidote to fear, isolation, and inaction can mean many different things and be applied at many levels. The easiest way to describe this tool would be

taking the next small action that moves us toward the positive and away from isolation, fear, and immobility. Just getting into action, regardless of how minor, is the key to moving forward. For example, if our experience tells us that going to a 12-step meeting will get us out of our funk, then it may well be that asking our Higher Power for help getting up off the couch, finding our car keys, and then going to the car are the small but critical “next right steps” needed to get us moving in the right direction. Likewise, letting our sponsor or friend know what is going on with us may require the willingness to take just a small step, like picking up the phone and dialing the number.

Instead of dwelling on how an entire series of actions is too overwhelming given the mind-set we are in, the helpful course is to just identify and put into action only the next simple steps to get us moving on a positive path. When we do the required steps, one by one, asking for help and thanking Him along the way, it is amazing how the fog can lift. In turn, feelings of despair and depression change to those of progress and hope. As we are taking these needed actions, if the thoughts of doom and gloom continue, like an unwanted chorus of clamoring negativity, we can say this simple prayer (as many times as needed): “God, please don’t let me think this way.” It’s amazing how powerful a simple prayer like this can help us think, live, and act better. Why not start our right actions for the day before we even get out of bed in the morning? Maybe a prayer like, “I love you, Lord, and I need your help today. Help me keep my thoughts on You, Lord. Amen.”

Personal Story:

Michael was early in recovery, and depression, anxiety, and insomnia dogged him day after day. He had been told that his nervous system was only starting to return to normal, so he should expect to feel out of whack, anxious, and stressed for some time to come.

On this particular morning, Michael woke up after having several vivid nightmares about relapsing. He could only lay motionless for some time and finally was able to conclude that these were only dreams. His physical reaction told him they were as close to reality as you can get. His thoughts eventually turned to his mother who was in the hospital, dying from cancer and not having much longer to live. He had visited her during his days of drinking, but was there only in body. During these difficult preceding years of his mother’s decline, he had assumed the only way he could physically visit her was in a numbed state.

Frozen in fear and anxiety he thought, “No way I can go to see her today. I’m just not capable of doing this. I’ll probably not be able to go in. Or, if I see her, I’ll break down and make her feel worse than she already feels. I just can’t do this. I can’t even get out of bed.”

Then the guidance he had heard from his “professors” in the 12-step recovery program came to him in a clear, distinct way. Waves of ideas he had heard floated in like, “Ask God for help, then get into action.” “Do just the smallest, next best thing you should do, and then thank God for his help.” “He can, you can’t, let Him. Let’s not spend energy on cleaning up the wreckage of the future!”

Armed with these ideas, and a new glimmer of hope, Michael thought, “Well I could get out of bed and take a shower.” He asked God for help and showered. “Thank you, God.” He went on to get dressed, asking God for help and then thanking Him. Then to the car, keys into the ignition, navigating the drive to the hospital. All along the way, “Please help. Thanks.” Finally, through the hospital door, up the elevator and into the hospital room. Again, “Please help. Thanks.” In a strange sense, like waking up from a dream, he realized that he was now standing in front of his mom, smiling, putting the simple cross on her that she had asked for. Unlike his nightmarish thoughts just earlier in the morning, Michael now was experiencing the comforting realization that God had helped him do what he could never have done by himself.

When Michael finally lay in bed that night, he reflected on the day with amazement. “How did I do this?” he pondered. The answer came at once: “You asked for help and you got it. Doing just one next right thing at a time.”

He thanked God for His help and fell peacefully asleep.

Where Do You Stand?

Question 1: In what ways do I tend to think negatively? Describe and give examples.

Question 2: When have I been stuck in a place seemingly unable to move forward? What did I do? Explain.

Question 3: When did I try doing a series of “next right things” to come out of a slump or funk? What was the outcome? What is the next right thing for me to do right now?