

Note: There is support for including a Sobriety Circles diagram, such as the graphic from the back cover of the current Sobriety pamphlet.

Defining and Maintaining Sobriety

In our attempts to cope with the havoc compulsive sexual behavior brings to our lives, many of us engage in unhealthy or codependent behaviors. Some of us become obsessed with stopping someone else from sexually acting out. We may find ourselves compulsively snooping, checking on the addict's whereabouts, or attempting to manage their recovery. Others turn to drugs or alcohol to numb the pain. We may overeat, isolate, or commit acts of self-harm. We may rage, become destructive, or withdraw completely from our loved ones. When we act in these ways, we may feel out of control or not in our right minds.

Even behaviors that do not seem to be addictive can be destructive to us and those around us. Some of these are behaviors that we employ to deal with the pain and trauma brought into our lives by sex addiction; others are coping mechanisms we developed at other points in our lives. Whatever the cause, with the help of the Twelve Steps, our Higher Power, and the COSA fellowship, we come to see that these behaviors affect our lives negatively, and we find the desire to change. As we work our Steps, we learn to focus on the one person whose behavior we can change—ourselves—and let others be responsible for their own recovery. We begin to relinquish our damaging and controlling behaviors and let go of outcomes, trusting our Higher Power to guide us on our journey.

Sobriety in COSA is deeply personal; we do not have a single definition that fits everyone because our experiences have affected us in different ways. So, with the help of a sponsor or another COSA, we identify our unhealthy behavior patterns and define what our emotional sobriety will look like. We may document our discoveries by writing a list, creating a chart or spreadsheet, or drawing a diagram.

Many of us find Sobriety Circles* useful for defining and maintaining our sobriety. We begin by drawing a diagram of three concentric circles. In the innermost circle, we write those problematic actions that we do not wish to engage in anymore. We are sober when we abstain from these behaviors. Rather than creating an exhaustive list of our shortcomings, we focus on those actions that are causing the most harm in our lives right now. A short and specific sobriety list is easier to remember and accomplish.

In the middle circle, we list those behaviors, thoughts, situations, and emotions that tend to lead to the inner circle behaviors. For each inner circle behavior, we ask ourselves: "What situations trigger me to respond that way? What emotions do I notice just before engaging in that behavior? What action usually precedes it?" We put those things in our middle circle, where they serve as a warning that we are in dangerous territory. Something as simple as skipping lunch could be a middle circle behavior if we recognize that allowing ourselves to get overly hungry leads to poor behavior later in the day.

We may be tempted to include unpleasant emotions in our inner circle, but we are reminded that only actions belong there. **Emotions that tend to lead us to unhealthy choices can go in our middle circle.** For example, we may feel angry and respond by breaking things in our home. Feeling anger is not a loss of sobriety but can be a middle circle emotional trigger—responding by damaging things is the inner circle action.

The outer circle helps us cope with our middle circle triggers in healthy ways that lead to serenity. Here we list those healthy actions that bring us joy and draw us away from our inner circle behaviors. We write down as many things as possible in the outer circle. **We want to have a long list of activities that soothe us in the moment as well as those that reinforce our long-term sobriety.** We include our favorite physical activities like exercise, **sports**, or playing with our **pets**. We list poems or affirmations we find comforting. Attending meetings and connecting with other COSAs are important components of our outer circle, **as** are journaling, prayer, meditation, and other COSA **tools**. Our outer circle might be rounded out with activities that engage our five senses, such as listening to music, smelling **freshly cut grass**, running our hands over a soft blanket, drinking a cup of our favorite tea, or looking at a special piece of art.

If we can't decide in which circle a given behavior belongs, becoming more specific often helps. For example, sex can be a confusing topic for some COSAs—perhaps it is healthy in some situations but not others. By being more specific, we might realize that having sex when feeling pressured or in an attempt to keep an addict from acting out is an inner circle behavior, but having sex when feeling connection with an emotionally available partner is in our outer circle.

Once defined, we put our sobriety plan into action and seek **our Higher Power's help** to discontinue our inner circle behaviors. We keep the list of outer circle activities close at hand, perhaps in our phone or wallet, so that when we find ourselves in our middle circle, we can take action to move toward the outer circle and our sober behaviors. We **may** say a prayer, call our sponsor or **a COSA friend**, or engage in other outer circle activities.

As our recovery deepens, we learn to identify our patterns more quickly. Where we once may have caught ourselves just as we were beginning to engage in self-destructive behavior, eventually we recognize those physical or emotional symptoms in our middle circle that warn us before the behavior begins, and we redirect ourselves into thoughts and activities that are healthy and healing.

In our **COSA** sobriety, we learn to keep the focus on ourselves instead of obsessing over or controlling **sex addiction**. We come to a better understanding of the motives that drive our own behaviors and develop the ability to see alternatives in our responses to the world. We learn to affirm our feelings and act from a new position of self-awareness.

With the help of our sponsors, we find it useful to occasionally revisit and update our sobriety circles. Behaviors that were difficult to avoid early in our recovery may subside and perhaps no longer need our attention. With the growth and healing recovery brings us, we gain the strength and wisdom to address additional concerns, and we may add new things to our inner

circle. Along the way, we discover many new outer circle activities that help guide us toward serenity and peace.

*The Three Circles concept is © 1991 Sex Addicts Anonymous. All rights reserved.

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