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## Time to Grow Up: Living Life on Life's Terms

By Jana Heckerman

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It is often stated in recovery circles that an alcoholic's level of maturity when she achieves sobriety is just about where it was when she picked up her first drink. For many women, that first drink was taken during their teens or 20s. Imagine being a 40 or 50-something-year-old woman operating with the emotional, social, psychological, and spiritual capacity of a teenager.

It's not at all uncommon for a woman to be so relieved to finally be sober that she doesn't realize for quite a while that there are some significant gaps in her career development, financial status, emotional maturity, relationship skills, and even in how she spends her time. Part of living life on life's terms is about growing up.

### **Work and money**

Some newly sober women lack basic job skills or are underemployed. Others have lost their jobs. Some have hung onto unfulfilling jobs in an effort to maintain a sense of normalcy in their lives. Even professional women – executives, managers, attorneys, physicians, and entrepreneurs – have often not given full attention to their careers. While it's not suggested that a woman in very early sobriety make a major job or career change, once a little time has passed many find it either necessary or attractive to look at their career options from a new point of view.

Additionally, large numbers of women in the early to middle stages of recovery find that they have not accumulated adequate financial resources to provide security during the second half of life. There is frequently financial housekeeping that needs to be done, debts to be repaid, and amends to be made.

Facing the financial issues of the past can be one of the most challenging aspects of

sobriety. During my own drinking days I spent several years ignoring the IRS. It was a time-consuming and costly task to get those issues cleaned up once I was sober but, once I did, I felt like a huge weight had been lifted from my shoulders.

In coaching with sober women, part of my work is to help them understand that they are not going to be "rescued" financially (or any other way, for that matter) and that they can – even though it seems hard – earn a good living, manage their money, pay their bills on time, balance a checkbook, get out of debt, and even learn to invest well. Money is a reality in our culture and one sign of maturity is the ability to deal with it responsibly.

### **Rules of the road**

Many of us, while drinking, somehow felt that the rules didn't apply to us. This attitude can follow us into recovery. I know one person who, though sober, continues to shoplift. Being a sober adult means abiding by both laws and certain social norms. We may have gotten away with thumbing our noses at authority when we were very young or very drunk, but maintaining sobriety requires a high degree of integrity, accountability, and maturity.

Part of my job with coaching clients is to help them see where they may still be behaving in a teenage-like manner, allow them the space to uncover how these behaviors are limiting them, and support them as they develop more mature habits. To live with honor, we have to follow the rules – even the ones we don't like or necessarily agree with. Like paying taxes!

### **Friends and lovers**

Ah, relationships – an area that often needs attention once a woman is sober. Many of us, having used adolescent criteria, chose both friends and lovers without being fully conscious

of the impact these relationships would have on our lives. This is not to say that, once sober, a woman will abandon, dismiss, or divorce the people in her life. However, she may very well need to re-evaluate some of her relationships and probably set some new boundaries in current and future ones.

It is in this arena that our lack of emotional maturity and development becomes apparent. Being emotionally grounded means making discerning choices in friends and lovers, continually re-evaluating relationships, making tough decisions when needed, being neither the rescuer nor the victim, and taking care of ourselves first and foremost. This does not mean becoming self-centered, narcissistic, or selfish. It simply means that in order to stay both sober and sane, we must make our own well-being a high priority.

### **So much time**

One of the things I've noticed in my own recovery is that, because I'd spent so much of my free time under the influence, I wasn't in touch with my own interests. I didn't have as many hobbies as I thought I had and usually found television tedious. I would grow bored in the evenings, not knowing what to do with myself, and end up going to bed very early. Part of that is my internal clock – early to bed, early to rise and all that. But going to bed at 8:30 every night doesn't lend itself to much of a social life, not to mention that it interferes with romance from time to time!

Especially in early sobriety, women often report that they have difficulty filling their time. One of the things I work on with my coaching clients is helping them identify or rekindle interests, hobbies, activities, and passions. These may include music, art, a craft activity, going back to school or taking classes, reading for pleasure, writing, or taking up a new sport – just to make a few. Something needs to replace the hours previously spent drinking and I encourage women to develop new interests, skills, and habits that they'll both enjoy and that will serve them and provide a level of meaning to their lives.

### **Beyond surviving**

Years of drinking or using, even for so-called "high bottom" addicts takes its toll. Sobriety offers an opportunity for a fresh start, new learning, and the development of emotional awareness, life and social skills, and personal growth.

The focus of my work is helping women, once they are sober, create full and meaningful lives that they can sustain without the use of substances. This requires unlearning, relearning, and usually some brand new learning as well.

The drinking and drugging years are so often about surviving. The sober years can and should be about thriving which means living life responsibly, making good decisions, finding meaning and purpose, honoring the present, planning for the future, and contributing to the collective healing of those who are ready to heal.

Jana Heckerman is a certified recovery coach based in Pagosa Springs, Colorado. Visit her website for more information about her services which include private coaching and retreats at the Tapestry Lodge.

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