



# DATING

## in Recovery:

### Pitfalls and Possibilities

by Mary Faulkner, M.A.

Dating in early recovery has been compared to playing football without gear, running barefoot over sharp rocks, and the ultimate reality show. It can be the great escape, trigger relapse, or bring on a new addiction. Regardless of the pitfalls, dating, relating and mating are natural human desires that most of us will pursue — an important part of living a rich full life for most recovering people. Approaching dating with a little structure can turn pitfalls into possibilities.

Dating can be defined as a one-on-one relationship with the *potential* for emotional and sexual intimacy as the relationship *develops* (emphasis on potential and develops). Healthy dating depends on being able to stay clean and sober and focused on recovery. Dating can be a welcome distraction from the discomforts of early recovery, but adds pressure to an already stressful time. Most importantly it is considered to be the number one cause of relapse.

Chances of staying clean and sober are fragile during the first few years of recovery, but increase with time — rising sharply after five years. The more time spent learning to live joyous and free of addiction before venturing out into the world of couples and coupling the better recovery is.

Recovery is a gradual process and it helps to approach dating that way, too. It takes time for the emotions to thaw out, time to develop boundaries, and time to learn how to trust and whom to trust. There is a common tendency to bond too soon or the opposite, to put up our protective walls. Relationships are built in stages. Each level involves deeper intimacy and increased commitment — skills that are shaky in early recovery, but develop as healing progresses.

#### Dating in Stages

The examples below show three stages of dating. Notice that the first stage is about building your relationship with yourself, your recovery and your community.

#### Stage One: Single — It's a Real Life

Early recovery is a time of discovering who you are without the drugs and alcohol and addictive behaviors — getting the basics of clean and sober living. At this point relationships are about hanging out with friends and learning to have fun. It is best done without the complication or distraction of one-on-one dating. Stage one recovery builds the foundation for all the other relationships that you will develop throughout life whether you eventually form a partnership with another person or continue to live as a single member of the community.

#### Stage Two: Casual Dating

Stage two recovery is about testing the waters and stage two dating is about keeping it casual. It includes spending one-on-one time

with a variety of people but remaining free of emotional or sexual entanglement — *staying firmly focused on your program*. If recovery gets compromised, the deal is off — you're not ready, go back to stage one. Relationship guru and relapse prevention therapist Terrence Gorski recommends dating at least six different people no more than three times each. Learning how to survive a break up is a necessary part of the dating game.

#### Stage Three: Selecting a Partner

The stakes get higher at stage three as intimacy and commitment enter the picture. With at least two years recovery, and after spending a couple of years dating a variety of people you might find yourself attracted to one person in particular. Talk gets more serious as you begin sharing your personal hopes and dreams. Ideally this happens before entering into sexual relations, when the choice you will be making will be relatively free of pressure. The more self-awareness one has developed and the more experience gained in casual dating the easier it is to know if you are ready for commitment. And the less likely you will be to get hurt or hurt another person. Once the decision to move ahead with your relationship has been made, decisions about sex, monogamy, and future plans are made. ▼

#### Dating Readiness Quiz

Following is a bare bones checklist of suggestions to help make dating in recovery less of a pitfall and more like the best possible experience.

1. \_\_\_ You have a solid base in recovery under your belt. (Two years is strongly suggested.)

*During this time you*

2. \_\_\_ have remained clean and sober,
3. \_\_\_ worked the Steps,
4. \_\_\_ are meeting regularly with a sponsor,
5. \_\_\_ and attend a home group regularly.

A score of five means advance to the starting block. Four means proceed slowly at your own risk. Three means you're headed for trouble. Two, one, or zero means keep coming back!

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