

President's Column

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SMART Recovery[®] and Spirituality

Is SMART[®] a spiritual program? In one sense no, but in another important sense, yes. SMART[®] is not spiritual in the sense that AA is spiritual. SMART[®] does not have a set of suggested spiritual steps (the 12 steps) by which one can recover from addictive problems. AA's 12 steps recommend belief in a specific type of higher power, and recommend specific actions to develop a better relationship with that higher power. AA presents one way to understand what is important in life, and one way to connect with it. There are many other ways. SMART[®] considers this spiritual process to be important, but does not endorse a particular approach.

SMART[®] has not made any specific spiritual recommendations as part of its program. Consequently SMART[®] is compatible with a variety of spiritual orientations (although possibly not with all of them). Whatever your spiritual orientation, SMART[®] will not attempt to change it. Rather, SMART[®] will help you work within your spiritual orientation and include it in your recovery program, if you wish to.

There are many ways to understand spirituality. Spirituality originally meant a belief in non-material spiritual beings (a God or gods). Spirituality might also refer to the effort to understand the highest or largest frame of reference ("the big picture"), regardless of whether this big picture included spiritual beings. Either way, in recovery it is usually valuable to act in accordance with whatever one understands as the "big picture," and SMART[®] encourages this. Indeed, for many individuals recovery may not be possible without acting in this way.

For instance, in Point 1 of the SMART[®] Four Point Program, enhancing and maintaining motivation, there is an implicit spiritual connection for those who wish to pursue it. Enhancing motivation is normally approached in SMART[®] by a cost-benefit analysis. However, it may be impossible to understand the costs and benefits of a particular behavior unless that behavior is understood within a larger framework. Is getting drunk on Saturday night costly because it, to mention a few possibilities, annoys your partner, impairs your ability to be a loving friend, partner or parent, hampers your ability to move forward on your life plan, or violates God's will for you? The same behavior can be understood in various frameworks, some larger than others. Your largest framework, whatever it is, could be considered the spiritual dimension of your life.

Point 4, balancing momentary and enduring satisfactions, presupposes understanding what an enduring satisfaction might be. Identifying an enduring satisfaction involves reference to larger frameworks of understanding in your life. A satisfaction is enduring because it involves, for instance, being a better friend, partner or parent, advancing your life plan, or living in accordance with God's will for you.

Addictive behavior is a problem because it interferes with a bigger vision of your life. Perhaps the interference is with an intermediate vision ("I want to be a good musician"; "I want to be a good employee"), but perhaps it is primarily a violation of the biggest vision ("I want to be the best person I can be"; or "I want to do God's will"). If there is no interference there is not a problem. If you are dying from cancer and in pain, you are not "addicted" to painkilling morphine, because there is, regrettably, no interference with a bigger life vision.

If you wish to use the SMART[®] program to help you resolve a discrepancy between some intermediate vision of yourself and your addictive behavior, SMART[®] can be helpful. You may also use SMART[®] to resolve a discrepancy between the highest vision of yourself and your addictive behavior. You may also want to call the changes you make spiritual changes, and they would be! In SMART's[®] efforts to emphasize that we are not prescribing a specific approach to spirituality, we have perhaps neglected to emphasize how SMART[®] could facilitate spiritual growth. It is important for each of us to discover and re-discover what is most important in life (as we understand it), and to connect to it or work with it (in the ways we choose to). Not only can we then overcome addictive behavior, we can live life to its fullest.