

# Three Circles

Creating A Recovery Plan

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**One Step Rehab**

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# 1. What are the 3 Circles?

The 3 Circles are a technique used by 12 step programs such as *overeaters anonymous* and *sex addicts anonymous* which help addicted people to define three things.

- 1) What abstinence is
- 2) What constitutes a relapse
- 3) What constitutes recovery

The 3 Circles are a way of building an initial or preliminary recovery plan in our early days of recovery. Later they can be expanded to create a more detailed plan, but it is a simple and effective way of getting started.

The 3 Circles are especially useful for 12 Step programmes dealing with behavioural addictions like compulsive sex or overeating because they define abstinence where total abstinence is not possible (e.g. from food or sex). However, the 3 Circles can also be used to give greater clarity to a recovery plan for substance abuse as well.

Ultimately, the 3 Circles works so well, precisely because it is a multiple addiction tool. Most addicted people have more than one addictive behavior during the course of their lives and so it makes sense to treat ALL OF OUR ADDICTIONS as though they were the same thing – because they are!

## 2. Inner circle

The Inner Circle tells us what we will abstain from. This will be all of our most destructive addictive behaviours, or those behaviours which are so uncontrollably impulsive that we are powerless and unmanageable over them once we engage in them. We call these **bottom line**, or **inner circle behaviours**. Once you have set your Inner Circle, engaging in these behaviours means you have lost your clean and sober time. Clean time or sober time, is the amount of time you have been abstinent from addictive drugs or compulsive behaviors.

For primary drug and alcohol addiction the consensus has always been that any drug use at all (including alcohol) will be compulsive once engaged in and will lead back to intensive use of the drug of choice. Detoxification and maintenance medications however, may not compromise your sobriety if you are taking them as prescribed by an addictions specialist physician, and if you are following a treatment pathway designed to achieve recovery.

For people with process addictions however (such as sex or food) deciding which behaviours are totally compulsive is more of a grey area. The following are guides of what are thought to be the most compulsive and destructive behaviours for different addictions.

### Primary Drug and Alcohol Addiction

- All drug and alcohol use (pain medication or psychiatric medication and in some cases maintenance medication may be exempted now and moved into the inner circle at the end of your reduction plan if appropriate)

## Primary Sex Addiction

- Pornography
- Paying for sex
- Multiple relationships
- (For some people masturbation will be compulsive and therefore placed in the inner circle. For others it will not be).

## Food

- Processed sugar
- White flour products
- Snacking outside of planned meals

The 3 circles helps us define grey areas around our sobriety. For example, how will you administer pain medication? And what type of behaviour with medications would breach your inner circle?

If you are on maintenance medications like methadone or suboxone, ask yourself - is there a date, or a point in my recovery journey when I would like to be totally free of all opioids? If there is, then you will move your maintenance medications into the inner circle (along with all the illicit opioids) when you reach that date? Also, ask yourself, are there certain ways of taking methadone or behaviours which constitute a breaking of the advice of your physician and thereby constitute a breach of your inner circle? Place those behaviors in the inner circle, e.g. "Taking more than my prescribed dose". All of these behaviours could potentially be included in your 'Inner Circle'. It is a question of seeking the advice of other people in recovery about where you draw the line. These finer points of chemical abstinence are dependent on your own individual circumstances. For

example, someone who has suffered severe and enduring mental or emotional health issues may need a period of being prescribed drugs like anti-depressant's or anti-psychotics whereas other people will not. These individualized aspects of recovery are legitimate if they are done in combination with accountability to others including addiction treatment professionals and your peers in recovery.

The end goal of the Inner Circle is to define your abstinence and consequently your sobriety date. Your sobriety date is the day you began abstaining from drugs or compulsive behaviours. From your sobriety date you can then build your 'clean time' or 'sober time' which helps you celebrate milestones in your recovery: one day, one month, three months, six months, one year. This is extremely important to keep your sense of yourself as a 'recovering addict'.

Defining ourselves as an addict is not as negative as it sounds. We do it to remind ourselves of the true nature of our disorder, and the way it has permanently re-wired our brain's reward system with regard to drugs, alcohol use or other compulsive behaviours. We will not recover this control over our drug or behavior of choice and so we define ourselves as addicts without stigma in the same way diabetics would not hesitate to define themselves as diabetic.

Be careful and considerate as to what goes in your inner circle. If you engage in an Inner Circle activity you have lost your clean and sober time, so make sure that it is achievable (especially in the case of behavioural addictions). In the case of substance addictions, abstinence from all mind-altering drugs is required to be recognised as clean and sober within 12 Step fellowships. However, as we have noted, detoxification and maintenance medications may be exempted in the short to mid-term if there is a 'treatment plan' and this needn't mean you aren't 'sober'.

## 2. Middle Circle

Just as the inner circle is used to define our bottom line behaviours which we must abstain from, the middle circle is used to outline and define the boundaries of our addiction and isolate the things that have the potential to lead us back to using (known as a relapse). The middle circle comprises what is in effect our relapse prevention plan. It should contain details of the following things:

### 1. Activators or triggers

These are the stressful events and avoidable situations which trigger our addiction. They could be people, places or things. They might be internal (e.g. emotional states or illness) or external (other people, stressful situations or drug paraphernalia).

- Bars, pubs, sex shops, frontline drug selling zones, fast food restaurants
- Work stress, relationship stress, responsibilities, challenges, failures
- Illness, lack of sleep, depression, anxiety

### 2. Negative thoughts and irrational beliefs

This includes all negative thinking which might include specific thoughts about using or general negative thinking

- Perfectionism: "I must do this right....get what I want...be right....be first"
- Denial of our addiction, impaired memory of how bad it was or euphoric recall of using drugs
- Stressing, catastrophizing and 'awfulizing' about events

### 3. Disturbed Feelings

These are feelings which are unhealthy or unnecessarily disturbing for us.

- Over anxietizing, succumbing to unreasonable fears
- Deep resentment, explosive anger
- Relationship turbulence, bitterness, jealousy
- Shame, guilt, low self-esteem

### 4. Ineffectual Behaviours

These can be 'acting out' behaviours which are dangerously close to using our drug of choice (we call this 'edging'). Or it can mean general negative behaviours which create consequences which will then trigger us and make us want to use.

*For addicts and alcoholics these could be:*

- Frequently going into bars
- Keeping alcohol in the house
- Enjoying the smell of alcohol or dope
- Hanging out with drug users or keeping dealer's numbers

For a sex addict they could be:

- Driving past places that remind you of illicit sex
- Keeping old phone numbers of sex partners
- Staring, second glancing
- Dishonesty in relationships

*For any addiction they could be:*

- medicating in other ways other than drugs ie; sex, spending
- fighting, arguing, defending, rebelling, aggression and passive aggression
- scheming, manipulating, sabotaging, holding out, refusing
- isolating, hiding, procrastinating

*Triggers and slippery behaviours are similar but there is a subtle difference:*

- Bars might be a trigger to you, but actively hanging out in them is a slippery behaviour.
- A drug dealer is a trigger, but keeping her number in your phone is a slippery behaviour.

## 4. Outer Circle

The outer circle defines all those behaviours which will bring about our recovery. It is our 'Recovery Plan'. Just as it is self-evident that our inner circle behaviours cause us pain, shame and illness, so it should be equally obvious that outer circle behaviours will bring about health, wellness and peace of mind. Outer circle activities and behaviours should be based solidly around a programme which is specifically defined to treat addiction (such as 12 steps) but should also contain numerous complimentary methods and activities.

### Outer Circle Recovery Actions & Effective Behaviors

#### Get busy, get better

Replace addictive behavior with healthy activities that benefit you physically, emotionally, and spiritually. List those you would like to try in your Outer Circle.

#### Use H.A.L.T.

H.A.L.T. stand for *hungry, angry, lonely or tired*. Don't allow yourself to drift into any of these things if you can help it. Write proposed meal times, bedtimes and social activities in your Outer Circle.

#### Doing service work

When obsession strikes, turn your thoughts to the action of helping another recovering person. Write a list of proposed service commitments in your Outer Circle, such as making tea or 'meeting and greeting' at your local 12 step recovery group. This helps to increase social responsibility and civic mindedness as well as raise self-esteem and feelings of worth, purpose and meaning.

## **Meeting attendance**

Outline in your Outer Circle which meetings from which fellowships you will attend. If you prefer SMART or Refuge Recovery then list the times of those meetings instead.

## **Use the telephone!**

Call another addict or someone in your support network and explain your situation whenever you are feeling triggered and emotionally bent out of shape. Have a list of programme member's phone numbers in your Outer Circle.

## **Working steps or other therapeutic processes**

If you have been in treatment (including online treatment) then you may have completed steps 1-3. Back in your community you need to find a sponsor and work through the rest of the steps. Steps 4-12 will give you valuable information as to what constitutes your recovery and you can place findings from those steps into your Outer Circle.

## **Positive environment**

Positive people, pleasant smells, nature and other uplifting experiences. List the places and people that are meaningful for you and part of your recovery in the Outer Circle. Perhaps you can schedule day trips or holidays in advance and begin planning for these. It is important that your Outer Circle contains things that are fun as well as recovery 'tasks'.

## **Physical activity and exercise**

Physical exercise releases serotonin, endorphins and enkaphalins in the brain, all of which make us feel calmer, increase the effectiveness and speed of our mental functioning, raise mood, and increase our organizational ability, spatial awareness and many other brain and body functions.

## **Build healthy positive thought processes**

Use CBT, REBT or other therapies like Gestalt therapy, Person-Centred Therapy and others.

## **Bibliotherapy & Spirituality**

Explore the roots of therapeutic and spiritual concepts by reading a variety of material on spirituality, psychology, science, health and anything else that aids your self-development. Examples may include Greek Philosophy, Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Christian or Islamic ethics or native spiritual beliefs.

## **Writing**

Use journals, creative writing or poetry to express yourself. Take a course.

## **Engage in spiritual practices, or other disciplines**

Examples can be martial arts, yoga, breathing and relaxation techniques, creative visualization, affirmations, toning or singing, meditation, prayer and other reflective, calming activities which strengthen neuronal networks, thicken the

cortex, increase power of concentration, and have a long term beneficial effect on relaxation and sleep.

### **Experimenting with creative or novel activities**

Examples might be drama, art, music or learning a new language. This will increase the strengthening of certain brain circuits, especially in the brain's learning, reward and memory pathways.

### **Be sociable**

This will help develop social skills and build exposure to emotional experiences like intimacy. This will aid the repair of circuits in the cortex and limbic brain which facilitate good social and emotional intelligence, bonding, cooperation, feelings of belonging, verbal and non-verbal communication.

## Exercise: Complete a Three 'Circle' Plan

Although we refer to 3 "circles" sometimes it's easier to draw them out using squares or rectangles. Whatever works for you. On the next page is an example of a completed 3 'Circle' plan for drug addictions + process addictions. You can use the blank plan on the following page for whichever is your addiction. You can also download blank 3 circle plans on the website.

1. Place all your compulsive and uncontrollable addictive behaviours which you are powerless and unmanageable over in the Inner Circle
2. Place your triggers, negative thinking, disturbed feelings and ineffectual behaviours in the Middle Circle
3. Brainstorm with your peers and counsellor to create Outer Circle Behaviours and activities which will provide the solution to these Inner and Middle Circle problems. Place those in the green Outer Circle

## Example of a 3 'circle' plan



Blank 3 'Circle' Plan

