

The Serenity Prayer: How it Can Help Your Recovery from Addiction

**God, grant me the serenity
To accept the things I cannot change,
The courage to change the things I can,
And the wisdom to know the difference.**

These days, a lot of people have heard of the Serenity Prayer. Anyone who has gone to 12-Step groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous or Al-Anon knows this prayer as the group recitation at the end of these meetings.

But although you may have heard this prayer a number of times, and perhaps recited it yourself many times, have you actually explored its meaning in a deeper way to see what it really means to you?

This profoundly simple piece of writing has many important spiritual lessons nestled within it. Let's take a look at each of the four parts.

God, grant me the serenity...

In the first line, the word "God" is used. For some people, this is an appropriate way to invoke that which they are praying to, but for others, the word "God" might be more problematic. If that is the case for you, if you are having difficulty with that "religious" concept, I encourage you to have an alternate word that you can use. Some examples might be:

- Goddess
- Higher Power
- Divine Love
- Great Spirit
- Creator
- Universe or Universal Force

No matter what we choose to call it, most of us recognize that there is indeed a power greater than us. To test that theory, consider this: even if you don't want the sun to rise tomorrow, it is going to rise anyway. Even if you want the grass outside to be purple, it is going to be green anyway.

There are many things we have absolutely no control over. Who is in charge of those things? It is that mystical, mysterious force that no human being totally understands!

So let's go back to that first line of the Serenity Prayer to explore some of its teachings.

“God, grant me the serenity...”

Ah, serenity! The dictionary defines “serenity” as tranquility, peacefulness and calmness. How we all long to feel that on an ongoing basis! But for most of us, that sense of peace is elusive; try as we might, the stresses of the outside world at times seem to take all of that away from us.

However, serenity is a major component of physical and emotional self-care. When we do not feel serene, we can suffer for it in a number of ways.

Physically, our stress levels are elevated as we find ourselves worried, frustrated, even frantic. Our immune systems are affected by stress, which can contribute to such illnesses as heart disease, irritable bowel syndrome and cancer.

A lack of emotional serenity over time can lead to maladies such as depression, insomnia and memory loss, as well as addictive behaviours such as substance misuse and eating disorders.

Asking a higher power to grant us serenity makes a lot of sense to me!

“...To accept the things I cannot change...”

In order to accept the things we cannot change, we need to first understand that we can't control everything.

What kinds of things are we actually able to change? What CAN we really control?

Until we explore this idea, most of us think we can control many things that we actually have no control over at all.

For example, many people think we can change another person, if we just try hard enough. We believe that if we can just find the right words, or use the right amount of coercion, we can make others do what we want them to do. Sometimes we might even resort to shaming someone to “make them change.”

But the truth is that we can't *make* another person do anything against his or her will. We can talk and talk in the hope of persuading the person to do things our way. We may try to coerce the person by using force or perhaps employ a form of emotional blackmail. Or we might attempt to show the person how foolish he or she is for not following our beliefs or doing what we want.

But we live on a planet of free will, and the only time people change anything is when *they make the decision* to change. As human beings, we always have choices.

Believing that we can make someone else change is a common mistake that many people make. If you really look closely at the dynamics involved in this type of interaction, you will see that you have no power over anyone who does not choose to give that power to you.

“...The courage to change the things I can...”

Now comes the hard part – if we can't change another person, or what colour the grass will be, or whether the sun will rise tomorrow morning, what on earth CAN we change?

And, of course, the only answer to that age-old question is “Ourselves.” We are only able to change ourselves, but that can entail some very hard work. In order to change something about ourselves, we need to first open our eyes wide enough to realize that our unhealthy behaviours have become problematic for us. We need to be willing to come out of our own denial and choose something different.

Let's look at an example. Let's say that the majority of your relationships and friendships are not fulfilling for you. One way you could look at it would be to decide that this is the fault of the people you are in relationship with, and that you are really a victim in all of this.

But a different, more courageous choice would be to decide to look inside yourself, to try to find out what your part in this might be, and change whatever dysfunctional behaviours you are bringing to your relationships. It is only when we change ourselves that we truly begin to heal.

Perhaps you have an addictive behaviour such as alcohol or drug misuse, an eating disorder, smoking or overspending. If you are choosing to continue to engage in this method of coping with life, there is nobody who can make you stop – not until YOU make the courageous decision to choose another way to deal with your problems.

Or perhaps you are in a relationship with an addict. If you have chosen to stay with this person, you may feel that you are giving way too much of yourself emotionally without getting much back in return. You may become angry with the addict for not giving you what you need, which could fill you with resentments. Just trying to get some of your own needs met, you might even find yourself becoming emotionally manipulative with your addicted partner.

Instead of trying to make the addict change, a healthier choice would be to decide what you are and aren't willing to put up with anymore and set clear boundaries. When those boundaries are crossed, you then have the option to make more courageous choices for yourself, such as to leave if you feel you are being treated disrespectfully.

It is not easy to take this kind of responsibility for ourselves – and that is why this part of the Serenity Prayer calls for courage. It doesn't require courage to do the easy things in life. It takes courage to be willing to change ourselves if we are not happy with something in our lives.

“...And the wisdom to know the difference.”

To me, this last line is the most important part of the Serenity Prayer. When we have “the wisdom to know the difference” between what we can and cannot change, we can save ourselves a lot of trouble and a lot of energy. When we can distinguish between what is in our control from what is not in our control, *we can stop trying to control what we absolutely cannot control!*

The ripple effects of doing this inner work and changing what we are no longer comfortable with in ourselves can be far-reaching. The most important ripple effect is the increase in self-respect we feel when we finally become “real” with ourselves and take the appropriate actions that lead us to healthy change.

We begin to accept our own imperfections and develop some very necessary understanding and compassion for ourselves. This in turn helps us to be more understanding and compassionate towards others, even when we don't like their behaviours.

In addition, when we start to respect ourselves more, we begin setting healthier boundaries with the people in our lives. We find ourselves taking personal responsibility for ourselves and our decisions, including the ways in which we've allowed others to treat us.

Being granted the wisdom to know the difference between what you can and cannot change, and knowing how to change the things you can control, will create the serenity that you may have been seeking to find in your life.

So the next time you hear or recite the Serenity Prayer, consider what this simple prayer really means, and how you can change the things you really can change so that you can have the quality of life you want.